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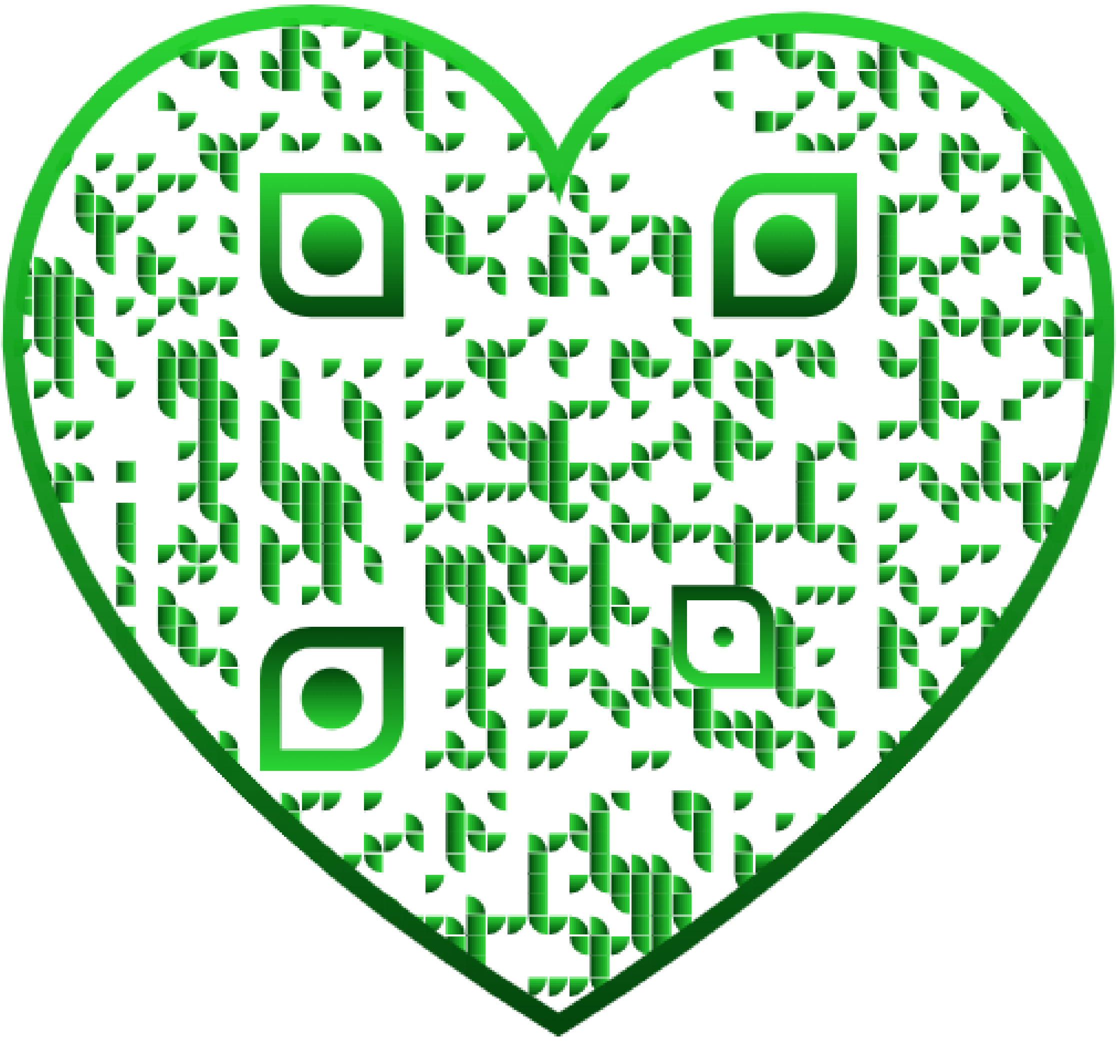

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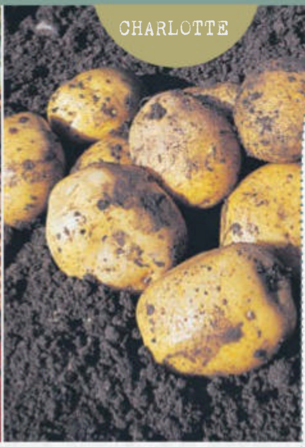

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Amateur GARDENING 140 years of practical advice
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A warm welcome

Sowing the seeds of a new year

January is notorious as a bit of a tricky month all round, with continuing reduced light levels and biting cold as our precious outdoor spaces sit bare boned and in slumber. Of course, there are signs of life and green shoots if you look for them, and on a crisp winter's morning the daybreak can provide the most heartwarming and colourful display, while the excitable chatter of the birds' frenzy on the feeders never fails to delight.

With the natural world in semi and complete hibernation, our own energy levels will, by default, also be reduced, so please do bear this in mind. While it's lovely to be outside, this is also a time for a little guilt-free rest. It's an opportunity, more so than ever, to garden as you see fit, as and when you like, away from the pressure of those long to-do lists that can emerge as the gardening season progresses.

Yes, some seed will benefit from being sown now, particularly chillies, peppers and aubergines, but do what works for you and your own gardening space. It can seem earlier and earlier each year that the internet and social media starts filling with must-do seed sowing recommendations , and these can make one feel a little left behind, or with reduced energy levels a little akin to running up an escalator the wrong way. I have tried that last one once by the way (a long story for another time) and it's not to be recommended, especially not in January.

So, I would urge you to do what works for you and not feel pressure to sow too much now. Remember also that seedlings will need protection and care over the months ahead, especially from the cold, so less can be more, and succession-sown seed is easier to manage than one large batch. Some friends of mine who grow organic vegetables turn over part of their bedroom to aubergine seedlings early in the year, and these often have to be moved from one side of the room to the other on a daily basis to maximise the light and growing potential. That's a lot of work! So grow what you love, sow what absolutely needs to be sown, but do be kind to yourself in the process during the weeks ahead.

This issue our merry band of brilliant expert *AG* contributors include Ruth Hayes, Bob Flowerdew, Graham Clarke, Anne Swithinbank, Lucy Chamberlain, Michael Perry, Beth Chatto Gardens, Barbara Segall, John Negus, Mike Palmer, Stephanie Hafferty, Adam Kirtland, Liz Zorab, Ellen Mary, Rosie Irving and Toby Buckland.

We hope you enjoy this issue.

Please keep writing in. I love receiving your ideas, letters, questions, musings and poems. The spirit of *AG* continues rejuvenated, working towards a brighter green future for us all, together.

Kim x

Kim Stoddart *AG*'s editor-in-chief

ISSN: 0954-8513

Amateur Gardening
Kelsey Publishing Ltd.
The Granary, Downs Court, Yalding Hill,
Yalding, Maidstone, Kent, ME18 6AL

Editorial
Editor Kim Stoddart
Deputy editor Ruth Hayes
Editorial consultant Sue Bradley
E-mail: Editor@amateurgardening.com
Website: www.amateurgardening.com

Management
CEO Steve Kendall
Managing director Fiona Mercer
Group publisher Gareth Beesley
Group web editor Rachel Harper
Subscriptions marketing manager
Claire Aspinall
Retail director Steve Brown

UK customer service team 01959 543 747
cs@kelsey.co.uk

UK Subscriptions 01959 543747
https://shop.kelsey.co.uk/amateur-gardening-magazine

Distribution in UK
Seymour Distribution Limited
2 East Poultry Avenue, London EC1A 9PT
Tel: 020 7429 4000 | www.seymour.co.uk

Distribution in Northern Ireland & Republic of Ireland
Newspread Tel: +353 23 886 3850

Advertisement sales
Head of Commercial Julia Barrass
Julia.Barrass@kelsey.co.uk
Talk Media Sales Ltd
Sales director Russell Bedford
01732 445328 | Russell@talk-media.uk
Sales Bonnie Howard
01732 447008 | bonnie@talk-media.uk
Contact Wendy King
01732 448748 | wendy@talk-media.uk

Design
Lee Caple

Production
Head of ad print and design Nick Bond
01732 447006
production@talkmediasales.co.uk

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8 February 2025

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Your NEWS FORTNIGHT

Bringing you some of the gardening news highlights

Organic seed potatoes and advice for all

RHS garden trends for the year highlight climate resilience

Sustainability and fun are key for our gardens in 2025

Perennials such as dahlias are set to take over from annual bedding plants

© Shutterstock

Fewer bedding plants, increased local water capture and storage, and more edible perennials and carnivorous plants are just some of the important gardening trends for 2025, according to the Royal Horticultural Society.

Homeowners will also be increasingly having fun with their gardening plans, and looking at their front gardens as places where they can charge and park their electric cars (and keep conventional ones) but also use the space for growing plants and helping their local environment.

Guy Barter, the RHS Chief Horticulturist, said: “Gardens never stand still and 2025 is likely to see not only new, exciting planting choices but new ways of designing, growing and maintaining spaces.”

Fruit trees and shrubs and perennial vegetables will continue to grow in popularity as they are low maintenance, provide structure to the garden and give gardeners their delicious bounty. This year’s key fruit could be the easy-to-grow honeyberry.

Community gardens and ‘sponge cities’ that help soak up excess water will flourish in urban areas, bringing communities together, offering food and wellbeing, and also providing protection from flash floods as plants help to slow the flow of rainwater before it soaks into the soil.

Green roofs and walls will also be used to stem rain run-off, improve air quality and boost wildlife habitats.

Traditional bedding plants will increasingly be replaced by more climate-resilient perennials such as dahlias, salvias and heathers, while carnivorous plants are proving popular with young homeowners.

Gardening your own way will also come to the fore and is being promoted by the RHS, which will have the first ever dog-friendly garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, a new sustainable garden with composting toilet at RHS Wisley and a continuation of the Your Space, Your Story campaign to showcase more personal approaches to garden design.

RHS boss Clare Matterson said: “You just have to look at the wide variety of gardening styles on display at our shows and down our streets to see that inspiration can be taken from anywhere. But issues of sustainability increasingly unite this difference with plants chosen not only for the emotional response they elicit but their broader environmental benefits.”

A top potato day

The West Yorkshire Organic Group is holding its annual Potato Day on Saturday, February 8.

The perfect place to buy your seed spuds and also pick the brains of knowledgeable experts, the event runs from 10am-2pm at the Exhibition Building, Shipley College, Exhibition Road, Saltaire, BD18 3JW.

There will be 40 varieties of seed potatoes for sale at 20p per tuber, cash only, as well as a seed swap and refreshments.

Please bring your own bag, further details are available on the group website at www.wyog.org

Plant fair date for Hever

Hever Castle & Gardens in Kent, the childhood home of Anne Boleyn, will host their first specialist plant fair in March 2025.

The castle’s Edwardian pleasure gardens will welcome multi-award winning nurseries from The Plant Fairs Roadshow.

Neil Miller, Hever Castle & Gardens Head Gardener, said: “It’s a dream come true to welcome the fantastic Plant Fairs Roadshow to Hever and having this collected pedigree of nurseries onsite, all at once, will feel a little bit like a mini Chelsea to me.”

The Plant Fairs Roadshow is made up of a collective of nurseries and includes high profile independent nurseries.

The event takes place on Sunday, March 23.

Suttons is given Royal seal of approval

Suttons seeds, who provide *AG* readers with their free seeds each fortnight, has been granted the King’s Royal Warrant.

The company has continuously held the Royal Warrant since the 1850s, when Queen Victoria was on the throne, acting as seedsmen to the Royal Family for 153 years.

“We are delighted and honoured to be granted the Royal Warrant of Appointment to The King, continuing 153 years of being warrant holders.” said Chris Wright, CEO of Suttons Branded Garden Products.

“This award is recognition of our commitment to delivering a high quality, sustainable range of products and services for all our customers.”

Above: Suttons Seeds has been given King Charles’ official approval

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The Royal Warrant is a mark of distinction awarded to companies that have supplied top quality goods or services to the Royal Household for a minimum of five years. It is a symbol of the highest standards, with only a select few companies granted this prestigious recognition.

Holding the Royal Warrant reinforces Suttons’ position as an industry leader and its customers can be assured that every product is of the highest quality.

© Irish Garden Plant Society

Aubrieta 'Shangarry' was the winner of Plant Heritage's 2024 Threatened Plant competition

Plant Heritage is set to find this year's most exquisite 'lost' plant

Is your home or garden hosting a rare, previously unknown or 'lost' plant? If so, you could be the winner of Plant Heritage's Threatened Plant of the Year 2025 competition.

This is the sixth year the contest has been held and the winners will receive their award at the RHS Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival in July.

Those interested have from the start of February 2025 to Tuesday, April 1 2025 to find their plants and submit their entries online.

The criteria state that the plant is not currently available commercially, but it must be a named cultivar that has been grown or sold in the UK or Ireland prior to 2015.

Plant Heritage's expert judges will create a shortlist – with some displayed at the charity's stand at RHS Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival – before final judging for the overall winner which will take place at the show.

The winner will be announced on July 1 and will receive an engraved winner's vase, certificate and special plant label to mark their achievement.

Gwen Hines, CEO at Plant Heritage, said: "I'd urge everyone to scour their gardens and other greenspaces for potential entrants!"

Every year, a variety of beautiful blooms, often with fascinating histories, are submitted, showcasing the incredible range of plants grown in this country.

Last year the winner was Irish Garden Plant Society's rare *Aubrieta* 'Shangarry', an attractive double-flowering plant that resembles Parma Violets.

www.plantheritage.org.uk/conservation/threatened-plant-of-the-year-2025

RHS celebration of favourite bedtime story

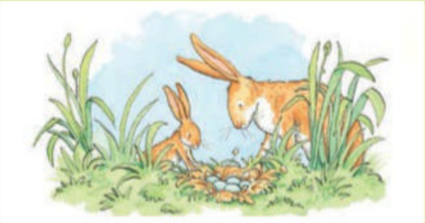
You don't have to travel to the moon and back to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the much-loved children's classic *Guess How Much I Love You* because this year the RHS is celebrating it in all five of its gardens.

The iconic book by Sam McBratney and Anita Jeram has sold more than 60 million copies worldwide and continues to be a global bedtime story favourite.

Launching in the February school half-term, young visitors will be able to experience a playful interactive trail and family activities which bring to life the story and illustrations of the book's large and small hares.

Connecting children and their families with the joy of gardens, gardening and nature, the delightful trails will re-enact some of the actions and adventures of the Little Nutbrown Hare while exploring the many colours, textures and shapes found in nature.

Elin Simonsson, RHS Head of Public Engagement, said: "The stories coming to life to connect our youngest visitors with the joys of nature found in gardens will be a lasting memory for young people and we can't wait to welcome them all – with their arms outstretched like Little Nutbrown Hare – from February 2025."



Above: Come and meet Little Nutbrown Hare at RHS gardens this year

Surveillance has helped stem the UK spread of Asian hornets

Hornet hunters save our bees!

The UK spread of the bee-killing Asian or yellow-legged hornet has been stopped in its tracks thanks to increased surveillance.

The insect, which arrived in France in a cargo of pottery from China two decades ago, has spread rapidly across Europe, devastating honeybee colonies.

It was first seen in the UK in 2026 and last year there were 44 sightings, but improved surveillance by scientists and the general public has meant that colonies have been killed and the safety of our bees ensured.

Professor Helen Roy, of the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, and co-author of a study into the spread and effects of the Asian hornet, said: "We are grateful to everyone who is helping to track the spread of the yellow-legged hornet."

New plants found in 2024

Despite widespread environmental doom and gloom, many new and unusual plants were discovered in 2024.

According to scientists from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and their partners, 172 new plants were found and named last year.

They include an orchid discovered up an Indonesian mountain, a toadstool 'with teeth' that was discovered in areas of southern England and Scotland, a vine scented like marzipan and a subterranean plant family from Africa, called *Afrothismiaceae*, that takes all it needs from fungi rather than photosynthesis and only appears above ground to fruit and flower.

Dr Martin Cheek, who is part of Kew's Africa team of experts, said: "The sheer privilege of describing a species as new to science is a thrill that not many will ever get to experience."

© Kew Royal Botanic Gardens

Right: *Dendrobium wanmae* was discovered on a remote mountain in Indonesia.

Are you involved in community growing projects where you live? Send in your news by emailing **editor@amateurgardening.com**

Your GARDENING FORTNIGHT

with AG's gardening expert **Ruth Hayes**

Move trees while they are still dormant

Make sure your relocated tree is secure in the soil and well-supported as it grows

Late winter is the perfect time to relocate deciduous varieties

The days are getting longer and all of us, in our own ways, have settled into the rhythm of winter.

Maybe it's a later start in the mornings or, as it is with me, an earlier retreat to bed with a mug of chamomile tea and a good book.

It is a time for being snug and warm, to rest where we can and prepare for the year ahead.

The same applies in the garden, where most plants are dormant, building their resources for the coming growing season. It is now, when plants are hibernating, that we must seize the moment and do any garden bed restructuring that's needed.

As long as the soil isn't waterlogged or frozen, the late winter weeks on the cusp of spring is the time when deciduous trees and shrubs can be carefully unearthed and moved to new locations.

It may be they are failing to thrive where you've planted them, or you need their space for something else. Whatever the reason for relocating, do remember it really only works well for trees and shrubs that are fewer than five years old.

If they have been in the soil for longer, they may be too large to shift but also, they will be so established there's a risk they won't 'take' in their new home, meaning you've gone to all that effort and the only result is a dejected, even dead, tree.

Moving woody plants should be done on a still, cool day when there is little wind or sun to desiccate exposed roots.

The day before you start work, water the plant generously and measure the spread of the tree branches, as this should mirror the radius of the roots.

If you are supremely organised, you can prepare the tree a year in advance by digging a trench around the roots and filling it with sharp sand to encourage fibrous feeder root growth.

If you can't do this, simply water the tree/shrub well the day before and on the day, dig carefully around the root area and gently raise it from the soil.

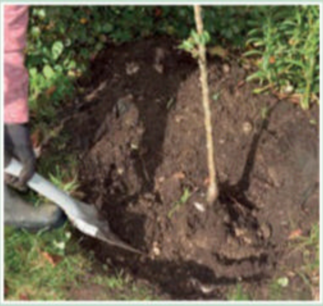
Wrap the roots in wet hessian or plastic and immediately replant the tree in its new home. Ideally, dig the hole before you lift the tree, making sure it can accommodate the spread of all the roots.

Plant at the same depth as it was growing before, as planting too deeply is one of the most common killers of plants. Cover the roots with a mix of soil and compost and water well.

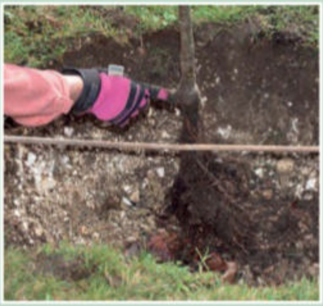
Moving house is stressful for us, and so it is with plants, so for a year after relocation, make sure they are fed and watered and not allowed to dry out.

Above: **Mulch with soil, compost or a wool mat to keep the soil damp**

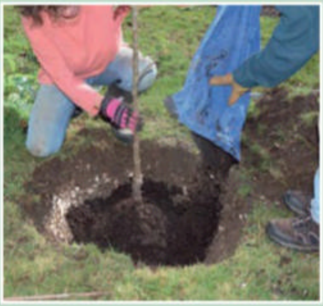
How to help your tree re-establish quickly



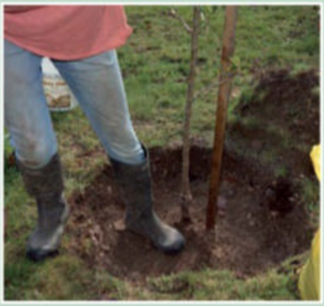
1 Dig widely and carefully around the roots of the tree or shrub, and wrap them in plastic after lifting.



2 Use a cane or rule to gauge the correct planting depth so you don't overplant. Make sure all the roots fit in the hole.



3 Get someone to hold the tree or shrub steady and upright while you add soil and compost all over the roots.



4 Tread down the soil as you go to knock out air pockets and make sure the tree is well supported, then water generously.

Place potted hardwood cuttings in a cold frame or mini greenhouse Inset: Make a sloping cut at the top

Do you have patience for hardwood cuttings?

This midwinter task is easy - but takes time

Patience is very much the theme of this page, and it isn't something I am terribly blessed with, so it's time for me to heed my own advice!

While the days are quieter in the garden, one of the things you could do is take hardwood cuttings.

This is a midwinter job, using material from dormant woody plants, and I've used it in the past as an easy way of propagating roses, fruit bushes and forsythias.

I haven't always been successful, but that's been because once the gardener's year picks up pace from early spring onwards, I have on occasion forgotten about my hardwood cuttings and they have languished and dried out.

But if you are more vigilant, they are a straightforward way of making more plants, though they do take longer to show results than softwood and semi-ripe cuttings.

They can be grown in sand-lined trenches in a sheltered part of the garden or, if that doesn't work for you, a large pot filled with seed compost and grit, or perlite, will do just as well.

Always choose vigorous healthy shoots that have grown in the current year, then pinch off their growing tips.

Your cuttings should be 15-30cm (6in-1ft) long, cutting cleanly above a bud. Make a sloping cut on the top end so that water will run off instead of sitting and rotting, and also to remind you which way to insert them into the soil or compost!

Dip the bottom end in hormone rooting compound, to encourage the development of robust roots, and insert the cuttings two-thirds of their length into the trench or pot of gritty compost.

Firm them in and water well, then pop the pot in a cold frame or leave the cuttings in their trench. Keep them watered and protected from pests and they should show signs of life by next autumn when they can be potted on. See, patience is what you need!

The moles are back!

Underground dwellers on the move

1 Much as I love the moles, the lawn is looking like the Andes so we're busy shovelling up the soil and adding it to the borders before scattering repellent granules over the bare soil patches. I'll re-seed them in spring when the weather warms up.

2 Worse than the molehills are the tunnels they create under the lawn, which can trip you up and sprain an ankle if you don't have your wits about you. Another use for molehill soil is to lift the grass over the runways and fill them with excavated soil, before firming it down, replacing the soil and watering the turf to help it knit back together.

How to grow your own mistletoe

One of the fun ways of recycling Christmas leftovers is trying to grow mistletoe from your festive sprig.

This mystical plant, which was once thought to have magical properties, can often be seen growing in huge clumps in the wild, and it can be propagated in our own gardens on a variety of trees including apple, hawthorn, poplar, maple and crab apple.

It's a simple process but it needs patience as it can take three years for plants to develop and five years or more until berries appear.

It grows best in sun, so choose healthy branches that are around 5-10cm (2-4in) thick and aren't in shade.

Carefully squeeze the berries one at a time until they produce a sticky jelly-like substance containing black seeds.

Spread this along the branches and then lightly cover it in fleece to protect the seeds from birds and insects.

- Although the mistletoe is toxic if eaten, it's safe to handle as long as you wash your hands well after 'sowing'.

Above: Squash the berries and smear seeds onto a sunny branch Inset: Protect the seeds with fleece

Snowdrops will increase over the years and form large, attractive drifts

Dreaming of a white springtime

Plant snowdrops 'in the green' for a wonderful show

If you take a look at our 'what's on' and 'gardens to visit' pages, you will see plenty of evidence that the country is coming together and celebrating the dawn of spring and the arrival of the snowdrops.

There are snowdrop sales and festivals all over the place. The appearance of drifts of these little white wonders fills our hearts with joy and hope every year, so it is hardly surprising that galanthophiles, as snowdrop addicts are known, will spend hundreds of pounds to secure rare bulbs.

Three years ago a single rare bulb of *Galanthus plicatus* 'Golden Tears' sold for a staggering £1,850 - not quite as bonkers as the tulip fever of the 17th century perhaps, but still a lot of cash to splash on one small plant.

Although we plant most spring-flowering bulbs in autumn, snowdrops are best planted now, when they are 'in the green'.

This means that the plants are still actively growing, and if put in the ground like this, they have time to bed in before dying back naturally and refuelling their bulbs for next year's display.

Planting now is often better for plants with small bulbs as they are prone to drying out, rotting, or being pinched by hungry badgers, mice and squirrels, but planted 'in the green', they will happily settle in and get established when they still have healthy roots and top growth.

Plants 'in the green' usually come in small pots or clumps wrapped in plastic bags to prevent the muddy bulbs and roots from drying out.

As well as snowdrops, you can often find bluebells and yellow winter aconites sold in this way and they are worth buying for the hopeful spring beauty they will bring to your garden.

TOP TIP A nurseryman once told me that if you carefully tread ripe snowdrop seedheads into the soil they have a higher chance of germinating

Planting snowdrops

Growing plants will do best

1 Make sure your snowdrops 'in the green' are healthy, with firm bulbs and good top growth. Keep their roots wrapped up until you plant them - but don't let them dry out and plant as soon as you can. If the soil is waterlogged or frozen, pop them into pots of peat-free multipurpose compost.

2 When you come to plant, get your snowdrops in the ground at the same depth they were growing before - you can tell by the tidemark of soil around the stems and leaves. Firm the soil around them and water well, then let them die back naturally.

Getting hellebores ready to shine

Another wonderful early sign of spring, one that may appear even before the snowdrops, is the hellebore.

From where I sit in the kitchen I can see three plants around the garden, and when in bloom their flowers in various shades of pink are easily visible from the house, reassuring me that warmer days are on the way.

I love hellebores, because they are so easy to grow - in our free-draining chalky soil at least - and their free-seeding ways means that most years I have lots of seedlings to plant elsewhere in the garden or give away to friends and family.

Above: Remove old leaves to make room for healthy new shoots Inset: Hellebore flowers come in a multitude of shades

At this time of year as the buds are poking through and starting to open, you need to cut away last season's old, tattered leaves to make room for new growth and also lessen the risk of diseases being transferred from the old foliage to the new shoots.

They will also thank you for a mulch of well-rotted compost or manure, though wait a few days if the soil is frozen otherwise the blanket of mulch will simply hug the chill against the soil for longer.

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Your GARDENING FORTNIGHT

with **Lucy Chamberlain**, AG's fruit and veg expert

How to grow herbs from seed and making the best of stored fruit and winter squashes

Lucy explains how to make the most of the next few weeks

HERB
Mr.Fothergill's
Dill
HERB
Mr.Fothergill's
Coriander
Herb Rocket
Rucola Coltivata
Bee Balm
Parsley
COUNTRY VALUE

Lucy explains how to save money by growing herbs from seed

Regular readers of my pages will know how much I adore herbs – they're little powerhouses of flavour that can transform your cooking. No other plants have the ability to make me salivate (yes, really!) when I brush past them in the garden and release their scent. Dill, basil, parsley and chervil regularly grace my spring propagator, but what other herbs can be raised readily from seed? With hefty credit card bills hitting most doormats this month, many of us would appreciate some financial savings in the garden, so let me help you find them.

It's simple – would you rather buy one plant from the garden centre for £4.99, or a packet containing 200 seeds for £3.50? I know where my money is going! Of course, not all seeds may germinate and seedlings will initially be far smaller and less 'instant' than garden centre plants, but patience is a virtue many good gardeners possess.

So, what species of herbs would you like to sow? The choice is vast. Culinary herbs such as sage, thyme, coriander, celery leaf, lemon balm, chives, mint, sorrel, oregano, Russian tarragon, Welsh onion, savory and even lemongrass are all readily raised from seed. Those known for their edible or steepable flowers such as mallow, pot marigold, chamomile, bergamot, heartsease, agastache and lavender also germinate readily from sowings, as do those with flavoursome seeds like herb fennel and cumin. That's quite some herb garden!

Seed sowing guidelines will naturally vary between species, so do check individual packet instructions. But as a general rule, good quality seed compost, some pots or modules and (ideally) a heated propagator or well-lit windowsill is all you need to germinate and raise a plethora of these powerful plants that will reward you well – and garden wildlife, too. What more of a reason do you need?

Keep an eye on stored fruit

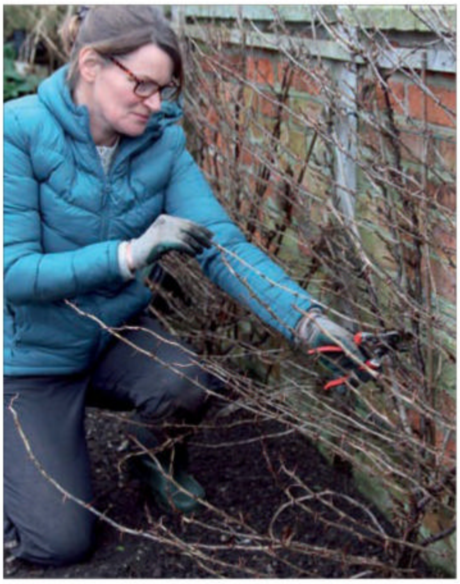
✿ I've been delving into my fruit stores and am thoroughly glad that I planted a mixture of apple varieties in my garden. Some like 'Discovery' can be eaten straight off the tree, while others (for me, 'Tydeman's Late Orange' and 'Bramley's Seedling') store for months. It gives me a staggered season for consumption rather than one almighty glut. In storage, be that a shed or (in my case) my summer beer fridge, I check the fruits regularly. Some collapse and rot for no reason – these brown shrivelled remains need removing before the rot spreads. Others (especially large-fruited types like my cookers) can succumb to bitter pit (sunken brown spots that penetrate the flesh) but the worst of this can be peeled off. My 'Bramley's' also develop a very 'waxy' skin but that's just the fruit's way of preserving moisture, so a buff on my apron before pie or crumble making is all that's needed.

Lucy explains how to sort and select stored apples during winter

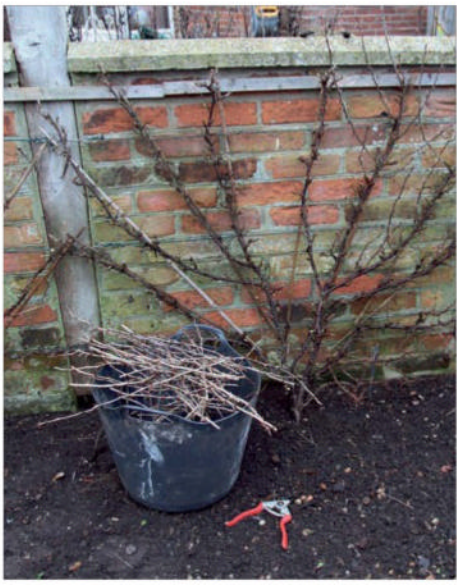
All images unless otherwise credited © Lucy Chamberlain

Step by step Prune fan-trained gooseberries

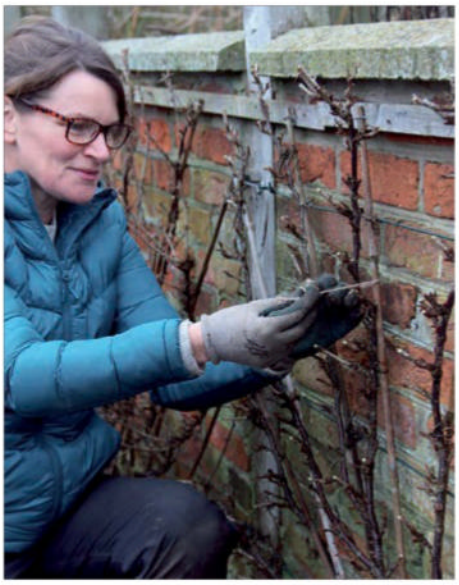
These thorny bushes are worth the growing space due to the deliciously tart fruits they produce in abundance. I grow mine as fans to save space and make dodging the prickles easier – plus it also makes bird protection with cages an absolute synch. Now is the time to step in and prune them, here's how to do it:



1 Check plants for the three Ds (dead, diseased and damaged growth). These are a priority for removal to keep bushes healthy and also looking their best. As tempting as it is to dive straight into steps 2 and 3, do this first because part of the beauty of fans is their symmetry, and making sure you carry out this stage shows you what you have left to play with.



2 Now you can tackle the fun bit! All the new growth that was produced in spring and summer of 2024 can be cut back to 2-3cm in length. This pushes the fans back towards their wall/fence thereby keeping them compact. It also focuses the plants' energies on supporting the strongest fruit buds towards stem bases.



3 Finally (and for me the most enjoyable part) tie in the main framework stems to form a symmetrical shape. You can tie in new stems, too, if you're building up a new plant. The easiest way to do this is to secure a fan of bamboo canes against your wall/fence, then tie the stems to these using soft twine.

Top tip

Use stored winter squashes

✿I've been dipping into my butternut and winter squash supplies since I harvested them in autumn, and only have a few fruits left, but I'm mindful they won't store forever. Usually come March many decide they've hung around long enough and start to rot, so let's crack out some more soup, risotto and roast recipes (I've seen one for a lamb casserole that looks very tempting). 'Crown Prince' is a variety that I've found stores for an incredibly long time – sometimes into May – but that does seem an exception as most don't have such impressive longevity. A Sunday night treat is roasted squash fondue: just remove the lid and 'innards' of your favourite dome-shaped squash, fill with your chosen fondue, blend then re-lid, and roast at 180°C until soft (around 90 mins). I promise, utterly delicious!

Right: Making the best use of of these winter storage stars

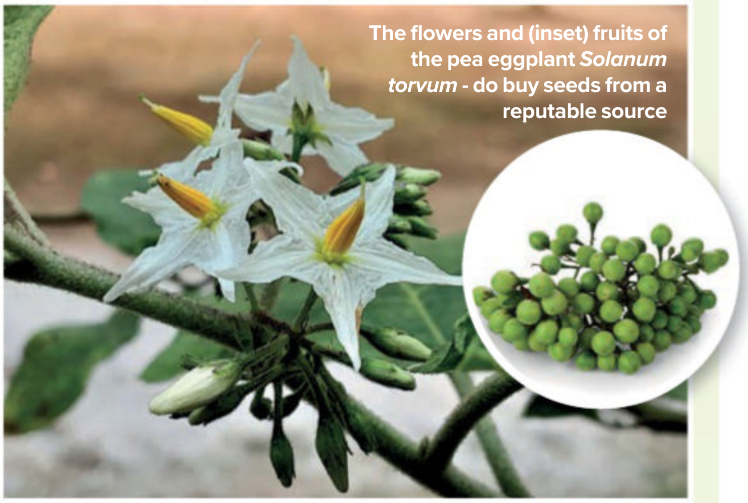
Your GARDENING FORTNIGHT

with **Lucy Chamberlain**, AG's fruit and veg expert

Why not try...?

Turkey berries

✿ Also known as the pea eggplant, this aubergine relative is a key ingredient in many Thai curries and pastes, and other world cuisines. The plant looks to all intents and purposes like a white-flowered nightshade, so please do ensure you buy seeds (*Solanum torvum*) from a reputable source. The pea-sized green fruits have a firm texture and are borne in clusters. Sow as you would any other solanum, such as tomatoes and chillies (i.e. at approx. 20-25°C in a propagator in early spring). Best grown as a glasshouse plant in the UK for warmth, support the lax stems with canes and twine if necessary. Harvest as and when the berries are needed – they turn speckled yellow once fully ripe.



The flowers and (inset) fruits of the pea eggplant *Solanum torvum* - do buy seeds from a reputable source

5 quick jobs...

1 Don't try harvesting parsnips if your plot's soil is frozen solid – it's nigh on impossible! You'll end up damaging the roots, so wait for a mild spell instead then lift a batch, trim the roots to length and then store in a bucket of dampened compost in the shed until you're ready to eat them.

2 As much as we love all garden birds, pigeons chance their luck during cold spells. They flock together in large numbers and could quickly devour winter brassicas like kale and Brussels sprouts. Protect these with wire cages or cloches – then put out some food for the pigeons by way of an apology.

3 Forcers of rhubarb, seakale and chicory, brace yourselves! Now is the time to clear these plants of old foliage, place a forcing pot over healthy clumps and apply the passage of time to encourage soft, tender shoots to appear. Chicory and blue cheese salad, seakale gratin and rhubarb compote await.

4 If your peach or nectarine tree succumbs annually to peach leaf curl fungus, it's time to act. Move dwarf potted trees into an unheated greenhouse, and cloak garden trees in clear plastic sheeting (fans are easier to cover). This keeps stems dry and stops the fungal spores germinating.

5 If you're planting new fruit trees and live in a site prone to rabbit, squirrel or deer visits (e.g. allotments), be sure to protect the trunks from gnawing and nibbling teeth – this damage can be fatal to your precious new purchases. Fine wire mesh encircling the trunk is your best deterrent

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PHOTO: JULIE SKELTON

MASTERCLASS

With **Julia Boulton,** Beth Chatto's granddaughter and chief custodian of the world-famous gardens, and her team

Graceful galanthus growing in the Water Garden at Beth Chatto Gardens

Top five snowdrops

A look at some of the favourite varieties of this sensational early year bloomer

What a joy to see the delicate, nodding heads of snowdrops making an appearance in the garden, signalling the long-awaited start of the growing year.

Although some flowers are fleeting, extending the display from late autumn throughout winter is possible by planting a range of well-chosen species and cultivars. *Galanthus elwesii* Hiemalis Group is the first to bravely emerge at the end of autumn, although the flowers can unfortunately get overlooked among the season's fallen leaves and spent plant material.

Enjoy snowdrops up close by growing them individually in pots to inspect their distinct markings, or plant *en masse* to create carpets of white beneath deciduous trees, or alongside fellow harbingers of spring such as winter aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*), pulmonaria and narcissus, all unfazed by winter's worst.

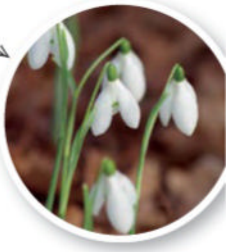
Grow in sun or part shade and in a rich, fertile soil and bulbs will steadily bulk up and increase with each year that passes, usually requiring division every three to four years.

Wildlife credentials with our Dr Chris Gibson

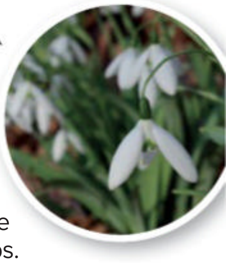
Introduced into our gardens more than 400 years ago, and now fully established in the wild throughout Great Britain, snowdrops have all the appearance of a native species. Four species are now naturalised, with *Galanthus nivalis* the most widespread. With the exception of the blowsy doubled cultivars, all are attractive to, and a vital winter/spring resource for, queen bumblebees and honeybees newly emerged from hibernation.

All images © Beth Chatto Gardens

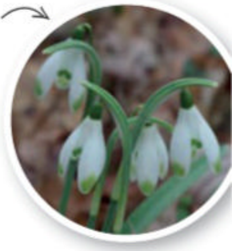
Some of our favourites:



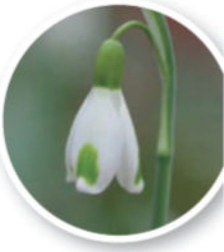
***Galanthus elwesii* 'Mrs MacNamara'**
Puts on a fine show early in the new year. A tall upright plant with well-developed narrow glaucous foliage. Slender flowers are held well clear of the foliage with small rather slim 'V' marking on the inner segment. The plant originated from Dylan Thomas's mother-in-law, Mrs MacNamara. Height 25cm (10in).



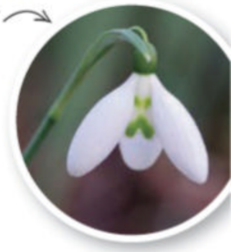
***Galanthus* 'Fly Fishing'**
An elegant, superior snowdrop, with good-sized flowers hanging off an extended flowering stem, gently swaying with the softest breeze. A seedling found close to 'Comet' by the late Alan Street of Avon Bulbs. Height 25cm (10in).



***Galanthus nivalis* 'Viridapice'**
Long white pendent flowers with painted green tips to each of the outer segments. A fine strong-growing snowdrop. An older form, which has given rise to many green-tipped clones. Height 15cm (6in).



***Galanthus plicatus* 'Blue Trym'**
A Margaret Owen selection, beautifully dainty inner and outer segments with similar green marks and the tip of outers recurved. Height 20cm (8in).



***Galanthus elwesii* 'Tuesday's Child'**
A fine, tall and slender later-flowering *elwesii* selection with subtle inner markings coupled with faint green flecks on the tips of the outer segments. Has a very distinct scent, especially when picked and displayed indoors. Height 25cm (10in).

You can find out more about these world-famous gardens and these snowdrop varieties at **www.bethchatto.co.uk**

Perennial sorrel has many delicious culinary uses, such as in soup

Super-reliable edibles

Editor **Kim Stoddart** outlines her favourite easy-to-grow longer-lasting crops

'Be prepared for almost anything' has long been one of my resilient gardening mottoes, and after last year's challenging, topsy-turvy weather, plant hardiness is firmly at the front of my mind. Of course what works, and what doesn't, also depends on a number of factors such as where you live, how protected your garden or allotment is from extreme weather elements, how high up you are and also soil type and orientation.

It's also very much about the way that you grow food, and not just the varieties you work with. Natural methods of permaculture planting, embracing more of a no-dig, biodiverse and mixed planting aesthetic, will help boost results and aid natural pest control efforts over time.

There are no quick fixes in life or in the garden, but there are always opportunities and methods to help you work around the latest weather challenges. Longer-lasting plants such as perennial varieties are an extremely useful ally as they are generally lower maintenance and are better able to stand firm against the elements. Once established, with their deeper root systems they can seek out food and water naturally from a wider area. Our fantastic forager Anne Swithinbank outlines some great ideas for edible hedging on P26, which sit well with Bob Flowerdew's ornamental edible recommendations for more easy pickings on P66, so I'm feeding in (if you'll pardon the pun, I couldn't resist) with some further perennial vegetable gems.

© Sara Jones Creuddyn Community Garden

Kim recommends weaving in perennial and low maintenance plants where you can

Sorrel

This lovely lemony leaf is very easy to grow and existing plants are early to re-emerge in the new year. It is a perennial garden 'must' in my opinion, as the low-maintenance plants can be grown in and around other varieties in beds and borders for multiple pickings.

Plants can be grown from seed or bought as plugs - just plant out in their forever home come spring and enjoy zesty leaves all summer long. They make a lovely addition to salads, or in quiche or risottos, or can be used in place of lemon when cooking. There are a few different varieties from which to choose; French *Rumex scutatus*, Red-veined *Rumex sanguineus* var. *sanguineus* and broad-leaved *Rumex acetosa*.

Scorzonera

This black-skinned root crop is similar in appearance and flavour to salsify but considered easier to grow and it should come back each year as long as you let it bulk up before harvesting its roots. Do leave plants a couple of years before the first harvests just to be on the safe side - it is worth waiting for. Then harvest some of the biggest roots for eating come autumn and leave the rest to reliably grow on.

The flavour is hard to describe but it's a little like asparagus, with a dash of oyster

© Shutterstock

This lovely root, scorzonera, is also know as black salsify

© Shutterstock

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Above: There are many perennial kale varieties from which to choose such as ‘Daubenton’s’, inset it is easy to take cuttings and inset Sea kale

and globe artichoke. You have to try it, really, to come up with your own take on the flavour! They are delicious roasted.

Sow from seed come spring and plant out in a sunny spot. In their second year they also produce the most beautiful yellow blooms which are highly attractive to both pollinator and gardeners alike.

Rhubarb

Not the most glamorous or unusual of perennials, but there is more culinary potential to this plant that we often give it credit for. Most commonly associated with rather tart rhubarb crumble, the stems can actually be used in a variety of exciting culinary ways. The flavour pairs well with smoky fish, makes a nice addition to multi-fruit jams and can be added as a savoury ingredient to everything from soups and stews to curries.

Plants are very hardy and will just need clump division when they start to look crowded, or send up a tell-tale flower, which means they need more space in which to spread and grow. You can start off from seed but you are likely to know someone with a rhubarb patch that can divide and share some of their own to get you started.

Rhubarb is a pretty perennial that can also be grown in beds and borders to maximise harvests. When starting from scratch, leave plants for a few years before harvesting your first stems so they have a chance to establish.

Perennial kales

There are a fair few reliable varieties from which to choose nowadays as awareness and popularity of perennial plants have grown. Some of the most commonly available to buy include cottagers’ kales such as ‘Taunton Deane’ and ‘Daubenton’s’ with various collard greens and sea kale varieties now as well.

It can be tricky to get your green-fingered mitts on perennial kales sometimes as demand is high, so if you know someone with existing plants, why not ask to take a few stem cuttings, it’s really easy to do.

When planting out in spring, choose a sunny spot and do check for slugs first to give your plants the best chance of getting established. Netting will also afford further protection.

Otherwise, any variety of kale is incredibly good for you, it’s a bit of a superfood all round.

TOP TIP Any kale can be grown on for a few years (especially under cover) if you harvest flower stems for eating in its second year and allow it to conserve enough energy to keep growing. I let plants produce some flowers for early pollinators before cutting back and harvesting shoots and stems, which make a welcome addition to veg patch produce during the so-called hungry gap of early spring.

© Shutterstock

Above: Make room for more rhubarb around your garden says Kim

Above: Purple spouting broccoli, Swiss chard and kales can also be grown on for a few years at least

These are just a few suggestions from the many exciting perennial varieties of vegetables now available to buy. For more suggestions see **www.incrediblevegetables.co.uk www.otterfarm.co.uk and www.shegrowsveg.com**

Garden wildlife watch

Song thrushes are one of the earliest birds to begin singing on spring mornings

© Ben Andrew RSPB Images

Bird of the month – the song thrush

Give this shy chorister a home in your garden

January can feel like a dull month after the festivities of Christmas and new year, but look closely and you'll see small signs of nature slowly awakening, with all the hope that brings. Listen – and you might even be rewarded with birdsong!

Song thrushes can start being vocal from late January, making them one of just a handful of birds you might hear now.

As we nudge finally into spring and birds start singing in earnest in preparation for the breeding season, song thrushes are one of the first to start singing in the morning – they really are the early bird!

The clue is in the name, but they have a distinctive and very pleasant voice which is loud and clear, and usually sing a series of repeated phrases, though each bird's call is a little different. They can get confused with a blackbird, another early singer, but a song thrush's vocal phrasing is much shorter and not quite as melodic.

How to ID a song thrush

Song thrushes are slightly smaller than blackbirds and are a warm brown on top with creamy white and buff speckled fronts.

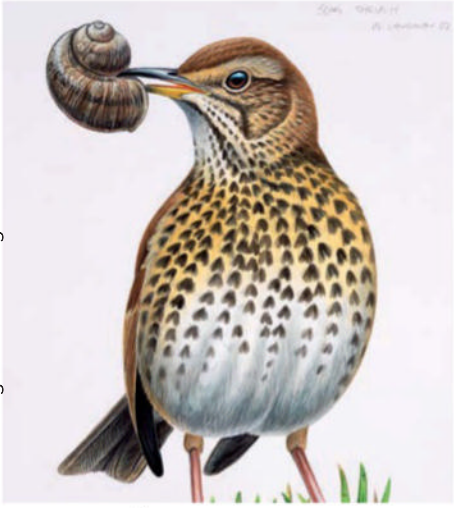
They're quite shy birds and you often need to look closely to spot them in the garden. While starlings boldly peck around in lawns, a song thrush tends to stick to the cover of bushes and trees, waiting for the coast to clear so it can come and try its luck at finding worms in safety.

They do excel at one piece of food gathering though – they're renowned for their prowess in de-shelling snails.

They use hard surfaces, often having a preferred rock, and bash the snail's shell against it so they can get to the fleshy goodness inside. Look for small shell fragments around patios or rock gardens and you've probably found a 'thrush's anvil'. Even better news for your garden is the fact they also eat slugs.

We've seen a steep decline in song thrush numbers, with populations falling by almost 50% after the late 1960s.

Like many species, a loss of food-rich nesting habitat is believed to have contributed to the decline, but there have been slow signs of recovery in recent years, although they still need help.



© Mike Langman RSPB Images

Song thrushes have learned the skill of breaking snail shells to earn a meal

Frequently asked questions

Q How can I help song thrushes in my garden?

A As with most birds, providing food and suitable nesting sites is the best way you can encourage them into your garden and help the species recover.

They like damp areas with leaf litter that attract worms and shelter insects, and a log pile and some wild flowers are also good features to have.

Don't use slug pellets – allow these birds to control pests naturally.

Thick hedgerows or shrubs are great for nesting

Ensure there's a nearby water source, even if it's just an upturned bowl you refresh daily and clean each week.

The more gardens offering the right conditions for song thrushes, the more chance the species has of recovering. There's more advice at www.rspb.org.uk

Q I heard a drumming sound in my local woodlands – is this too early to be a woodpecker?

A Great spotted woodpeckers can begin drumming as early as January. They are making others aware of their presence and marking their territory, as well as beginning to look for a mate.

Q A bird is using my garden nestbox – isn't it early to be building a nest?

A Depending on the species, it is probably using the nestbox as a roost, to keep warm on cold nights.

Some birds do start to scope out nestboxes as early as January, but they won't start to build nests and lay eggs until the warmer weather in spring.

Top Tip for January

The RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch takes place over the weekend of January 24, 25 and 26. Share information about what's going on with your garden birds and join more than 600,000 others who regularly take part in the world's largest garden wildlife survey.

All you need to do is spend an hour counting the birds visiting your garden and send in the results.

Find out more at *www. rspb.org.uk/ birdwatch*

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How to grow rubber plants

Plantsman Graham Clarke looks at some of the modern variations of the indoor rubber plant – now popular, trendy and perfect for those who want to bring a bit of colour and living architecture into their rooms

All images unless otherwise credited: Graham Clarke

A novice gardener, fresh out of school and with an eagerness to learn about plants, will not need to be shown a traditional, indoor Indian rubber plant (*Ficus elastica*). They will already know it! For this is one of the most frequently seen and recognisable of indoor plants. And it is not difficult to see why it is so popular.

With its broad, glossy leaves, it adds an element of tropical elegance to any room. Native to south-east Asia, it can grow into a large indoor tree if given enough space. Its dark green foliage with a reddish tinge is a visual treat. And it's a plant that can thrive in a range of light conditions.

One of the best features of this plant is that it is incredibly durable and tolerant of neglect. It survives even if you forget to water it and it dries out completely; in fact, it is best to let the plant dry out between waterings. The only thing *Ficus elastica* does not tolerate is being overwatered, and/or left in standing water. It even prefers infrequent watering, which is ideal for the forgetful gardener!

But this familiar rubber plant is just one of many forms of ficus. The genus is surprisingly large – with around 850 different species, comprising woody trees, smaller shrubs, vines and epiphytes (plants which grow on the surface of other plants, but which do not take moisture or nutrients from them). Ficus also includes the fruiting fig tree (*F. carica*).

Ficus, in various forms, also makes up a huge portion of the UK's houseplant population. For this reason, considerable development has taken place, particularly over the past couple of decades, to increase leaf variety and colour, to create smaller plants for smaller homes, and to develop plants with a greater tolerance of indoor conditions – from dry air, and low light levels, to fluctuating temperatures and less reliance on water.

So, let's take a look at some of the modern strains of indoor ficus, and which are readily available from good garden centres.

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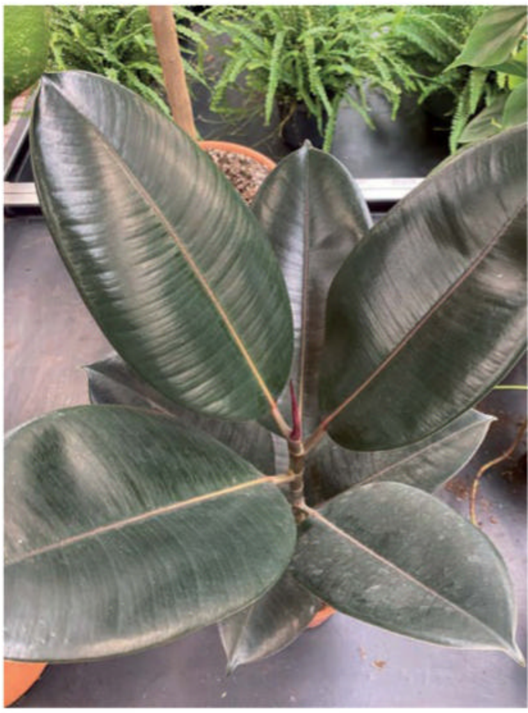
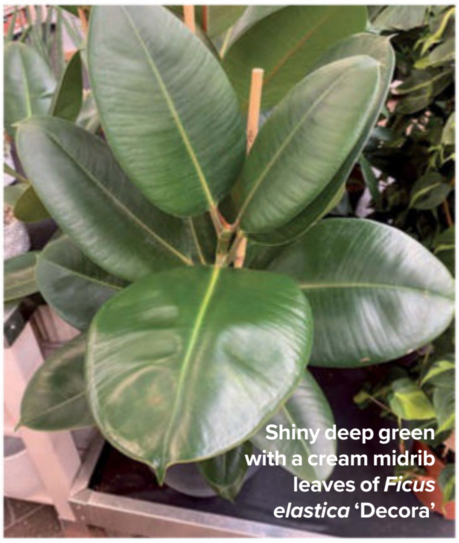
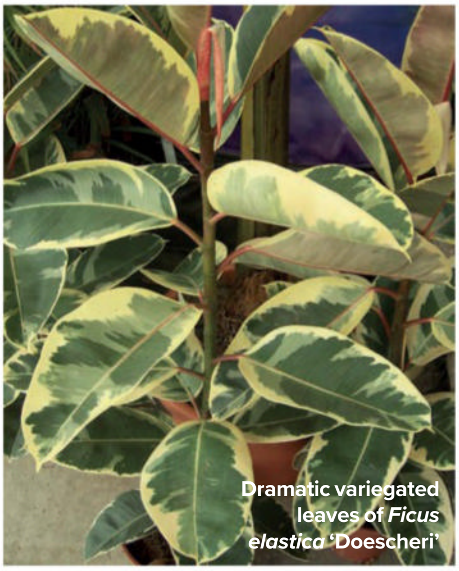


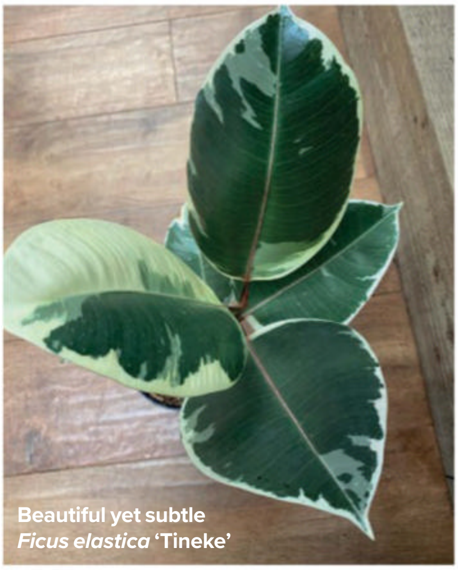
Dark green foliage of *Ficus elastica* 'Robusta'



Shiny deep green with a cream midrib leaves of *Ficus elastica* 'Decora'



Dramatic variegated leaves of *Ficus elastica* 'Doescheri'



Beautiful yet subtle *Ficus elastica* 'Tineke'

Elasticas and benjaminas

For most of us, rubber plants are indeed forms of *Ficus elastica*, but there are many variations available, if you search for them. Look out for 'Apollo', a slow-growing form, with smaller deep green leaves with short internodes (short gaps between leaves), held at an ascending angle from the trunk. It becomes a compact pot plant with an interesting texture.

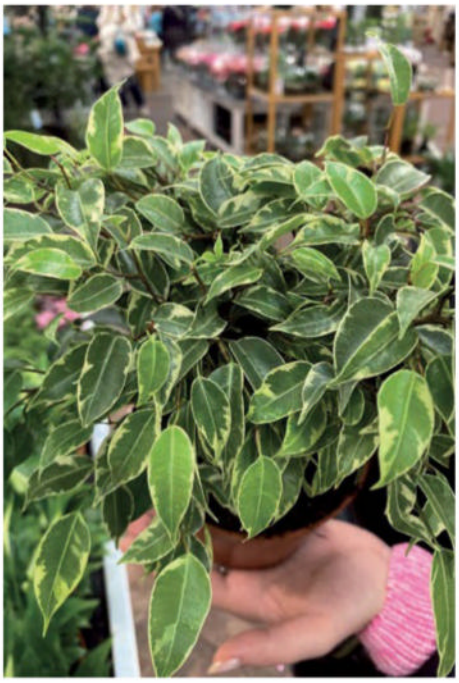
Meanwhile, 'Bali' has bright red leaf sheaths and leaves so dark they almost appear black. Similarly, 'Robusta' and 'Black Knight' both have leaves of very dark green, whilst the leaves of 'Burgundy' are dark green with a reddish tinge.

'Decora' carries shiny deep green leaves with a cream midrib, and a reddish colour on the under surface.

In terms of variegated forms of *F. elastica*, the most dramatic is almost certainly 'Doescheri'. It has long, oblong leaves that are much narrower than the ordinary rubber plant, and they are brightly variegated with yellow and cream. Much more subtle is the beautiful 'Tineke'. This is a prime example of how nature inspires fashion. The foliage is characterised by mottled variegation, which illustrates one of nature's perfect colour combinations: the camouflage-like creamy pink with pale and dark green. Indoors, it will stand proud at almost a 1m (3ft) tall, adding texture and interest to any home or office.

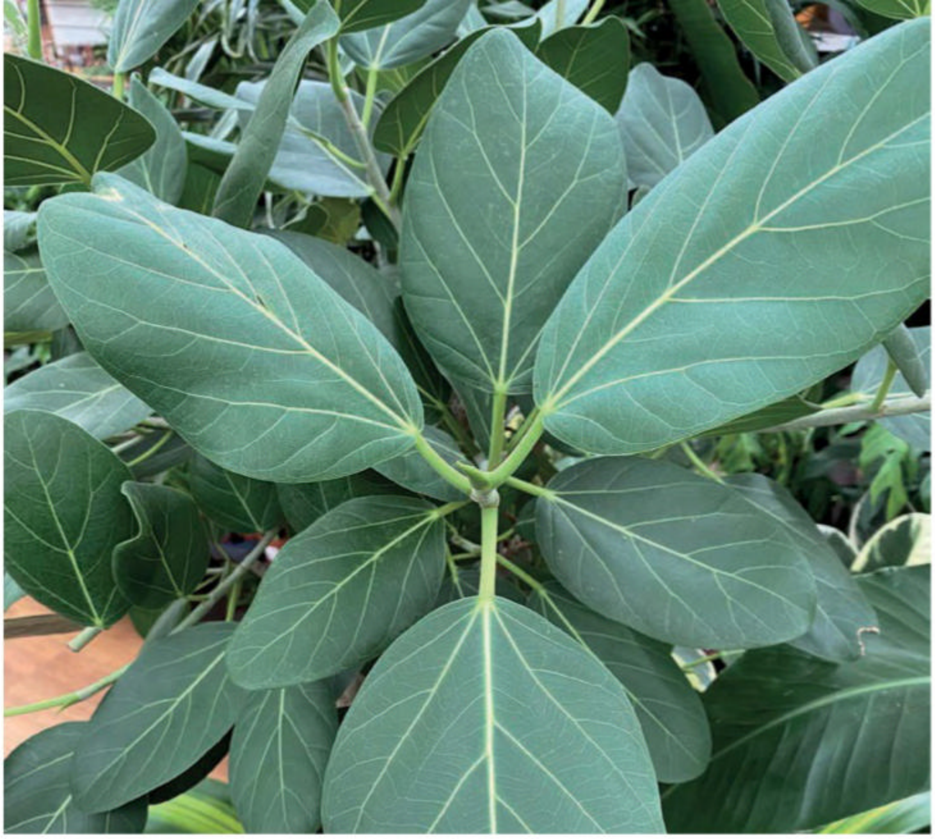
The second largest group of indoor rubber plants are the weeping figs (*F. benjamina*). The main species is green and plain – but still a most desirable houseplant. The form 'Variegata' has a small amount of cream variegation, which sets it apart.

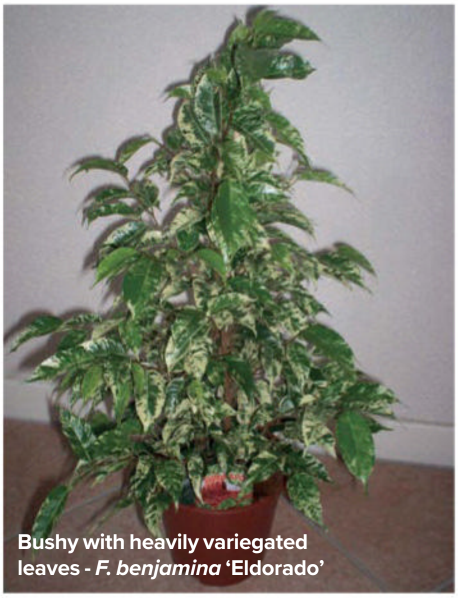
But there are many other superb weeping figs from which to choose. The most popular forms today include 'Starlight', which has an Award of Garden Merit, and features small, green and cream-edged leaves that are distinctively glossy. The midrib is notably white in most cases.



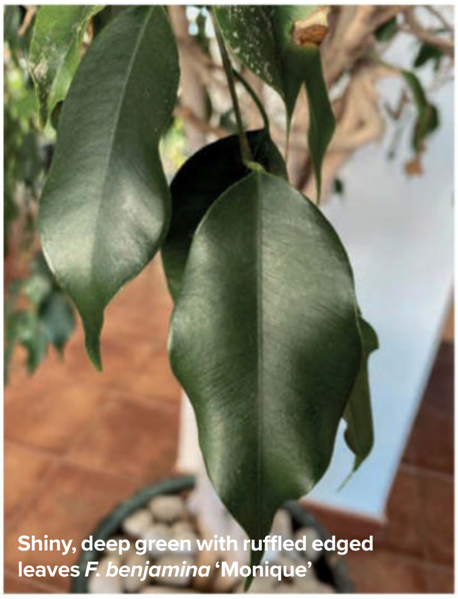
Super weeping fig with an Award of Garden Merit *F. benjamina* 'Starlight'

Reliably lovely leaves of *F. benjamina* 'Audrey'

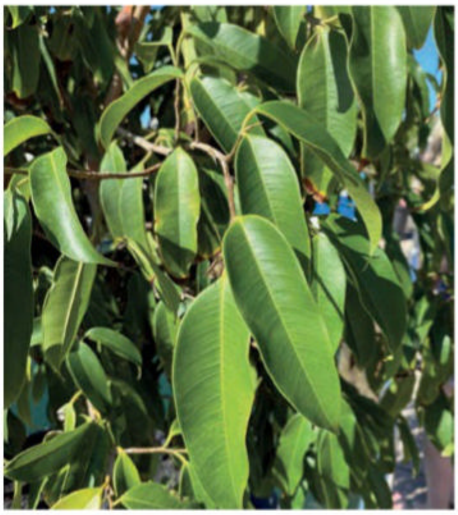




Bushy with heavily variegated leaves - *F. benjamina* 'Eldorado'



Shiny, deep green with ruffled edged leaves *F. benjamina* 'Monique'



Small, elongated, curled leaves of *F. benjamina* 'Natasja'

'Eldorado' is a very bushy plant with heavily variegated leaves, bearing three different shades of white and another three shades of green.

'Monique', meanwhile, is an upright form with a bushy growth pattern. Its elliptical leaves are a shiny, deep green. They have ruffled edges that become more accentuated in lower light conditions. Its mature leaves are hard and crispy.

'Natasja' has small, elongated, wavy edged and curled leaves, and is often sold with twisted stems as a novelty.

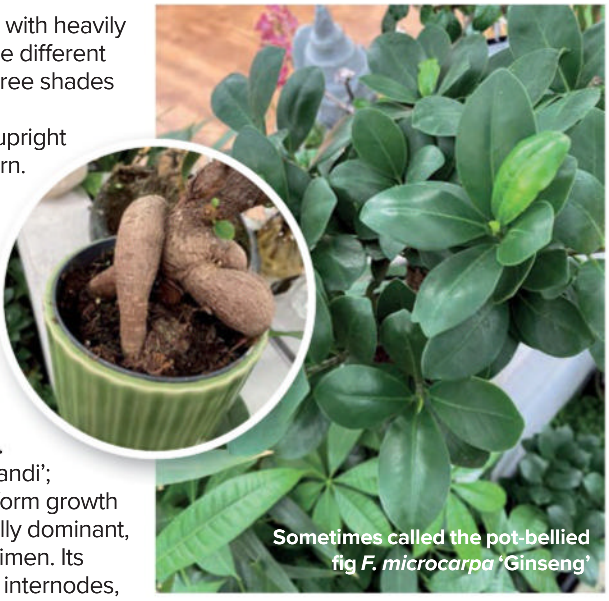
Then there is the curious 'Wiandi'; with smaller leaves and a free-form growth pattern that is slightly horizontally dominant, it has the look of a bonsai specimen. Its branches zig and zag between internodes, often turning at right angles.

Microcarpas, pumilas and lyratas

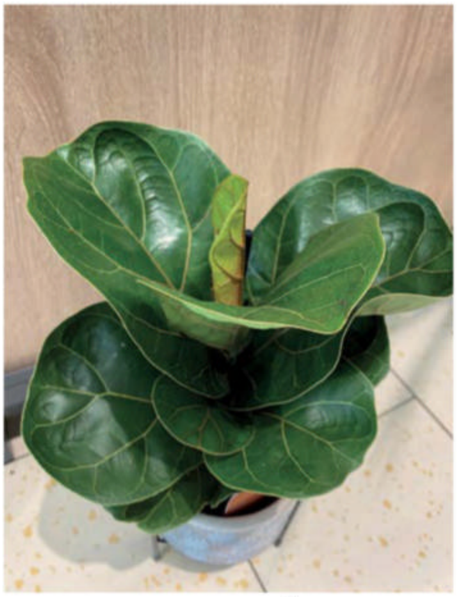
There are other rubber plant species that are every bit as interesting to grow, and delightful to look at. Take the curtain fig (*F. microcarpa*), for example. This is a bonsai-like plant; succulent-like leaves and a contorted trunk create are an intriguing talking point.

Amongst several excellent varieties, there is the bushy 'Moclame', which has relatively small rounded leaves of mid-green, that are smaller than most other varieties.

Look out, too, for 'Ginseng' which is certainly unique. This is sometimes called the pot-bellied fig, and you just have to look at its large, twisted, chunky trunk to see why. The 'Ginseng' name derives from these swollen parts, which resemble the eastern herb, ginseng.



Sometimes called the pot-bellied fig *F. microcarpa* 'Ginseng'



Dwarf form of *F. lyrata* 'Bambino'

Marbled leaves of *F. pumilas* 'Variegata'

Graham explains how to look after your rubber plants

The fiddle-leaf fig (*F. lyrata*) has large, strangely shaped glossy leaves with attractive veining, and which grow in a whorl up the long, straight stem. It is beloved by interior designers for its sculptural form and presence. It can be kept compact with pruning, or allowed to grow to form a large specimen plant. 'Bambino' is a dwarf form more suited to most modern homes.

The national tree of India is the evergreen banyan (*F. benghalensis*), and it is a familiar sight in monsoon and rainforest areas. In the wild it reaches an ultimate height of 30m (100ft) or so, however it has also successfully been grown as a pot plant for homes in the UK. It is chosen for its large, mid-green, oval leaves. 'Audrey' is its most popular cultivar today, sporting large, oval, leathery leaves with prominent attractive pale veining. This is a great choice for adding height and style to any bright indoor spot.

One of the most unusual of rubber plants is the aptly-named narrow-leaf fig (*F. binnendijkii*). It has long, graceful, pointed leaves not unlike one of the perennial euphorbias. The form you are most likely to see is 'Alii', the new leaves of which are peach-coloured with reddish stems.

You may also find 'Amstel King', with its long, large, leathery banana-shaped leaves; the plant has similar growth habits to 'Alli', but has wider, thicker leaves. Growth tips can be of a very pronounced pink-to-red, and these contrast with the mature growth.

Finally, there are a handful of much smaller-leaved ficus. Try the creeping fig (*F. pumila*), for example. Sometimes listed as *F. repens,* it has plain green leaves that are shorter on shoots that climb, and larger on shoots that trail!

'Minima' is very slender, small and slow-growing with plain green leaves. 'Sonny' has small, wavy-edged leaves with variable cream margins. And 'Variegata' carries leaves that are marbled and edged white-to-cream.

Caring for rubber plants

Generally, ficus plants are tolerant of light or shade, thriving in direct sunlight as well as in a dark position in the home where many other houseplants would give up. Variegated forms must have bright, indirect light; if kept in the shade, they will lose their super-attractive markings.

As for watering, apply it little and often, but allow the soil to dry out slightly before watering.

If *Ficus elastica* is moved from one room situation to another, it may drop a couple of leaves, until it has adjusted itself to the new conditions. Precisely because it is so durable, *Ficus elastica* can grow very tall. If it grows too tall, the top can be cut off – during spring – after which the plant will produce two or three new shoots.

When you cut into any member of the ficus family, the stem will exude latex. As with animals and their blood, if the plant loses too much latex, it will weaken the stem. To stop the "bleeding", dust the cut with powdered charcoal (from some garden centres or pet shops) or woodash.

Be careful with this latex – it can cause temporary blindness if it gets into the eyes!

Did you know?

- The word 'fig' was first recorded in English during the 13th century. It comes from the Medieval French word *figue*, which itself came from the Mediterranean Provençal word *figa*, which came from the Roman name *fica*, which came from the Latin name *ficus*. And there you have it!
- The latex from rubber plants has been used in some cases to make rubber, but do not confuse this genus with the Pará rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*), the main commercial source for the rubber industry.
- Ficus plants are widely accepted as being good plants for 'purifying the air' in houses and offices. Along with peace lilies (spathiphyllum), they are considered to be the best for removing toxins from the atmosphere.
- India rubber plants can survive 25-50 years indoors, or several hundred years in the wild.
- The species name of *F. lyrata* derives from the morphological term 'lyrate', used to describe its lobed leaves. Put simply, lyrate leaves are any leaves shaped like the lyre musical instrument.

THE YEAR-ROUND KITCHEN GARDEN

With expert gardener and *AG* columnist, **Stephanie Hafferty**

Slow seed sowing and gentle planning

Stephanie Hafferty dreams of aubergine harvests ahead

Stephanie enjoys the garden in slumber but starts seed sowing aubergines, chillies and peppers on heat mats

© Shutterstock

I love this time of year in the garden, when most plants are still slumbering and I can see the bare bones of the plot. It's a wonderful time for planning and dreaming about the growing year ahead, and getting all of those maintenance jobs done before the busyness of sowing and growing starts.

In the greenhouse, the first seeds of the new year are germinating on the gentle heat provided by heated propagation mats. These are chillies, sweet peppers and my special passion, aubergines, which require a long growing period to crop abundantly in our climate. A warm windowsill works well, too.

Once they have sprouted and been pricked out, they'll require plenty of light to grow strongly. A simple technique is to make a reflector from kitchen foil glued onto an old cardboard box, which bounces daylight back to the seedlings and helps prevent them from getting leggy.

Preparing the parsnip bed

It is much too early to sow parsnips as the soil is too cold and damp, and the seeds are likely to rot. To prepare for their eventual sowing in March or April, I am regularly hoeing their bed-to-be to ensure that it is as weed free as possible.

It is surprising how many weeds will continue to germinate during winter, unless the weather is very cold. This isn't much of an issue for veg that go out as transplants, because it is easy to hand weed around those. However a weedy bed is not good for anything that is direct sown, such as parsnips, carrots or radishes.

A few years ago I sowed parsnips, carrots and radishes in rows, and they all germinated well - as did a lot of rosebay willowherb. This beautiful wildflower is huge when fully grown, so there was no way that these root veg seedlings would thrive among it. The option was either fiddly hand weeding with tweezers to get the willow herb out, or hoe the whole lot off and start again, which is what I did. Lesson learned.

Be ready to protect early sensitive seedlings such as chilli peppers should the thermostat plummet

Stephanie removes rosebay willowherb weeds as she harvests produce

Stephanie explains how to keep beds weed free to help boost parsnip growing success this year

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Direct sowing trick

A helpful technique for preparing a bed for direct sowing is to use a sheet of clear polythene, a process called solarisation. Spread over the bed and weighed down with large stones, the polythene warms the soil, causing the seeds there to germinate. Pull back the plastic, hoe off the seedlings and replace the polythene. If you can, allow for two or three flushes of weed germination before sowing. This also warms the soil, enabling earlier sowing.

In the winter, I find that the soil doesn't dry out using this method because it is already so damp, but if your soil is very sandy or you live in a dry area, you may need to keep an eye on this and water as necessary.

Good sources of pre-used clear polythene include the wrappings from mattresses and old shower curtain linings.

When the bed is ready, remove the polythene and hang it on the washing line to dry out, before storing it to use again.

All images unless otherwise credited: Stephanie Hafferty

Parsnip salad is a star of a dish

Fruity parsnip salad recipe

Parsnips are tasty roasted, in stews or made into soups, but it is not widely known that they are also delicious raw. They add a sweet nutty crunchiness to salads, and contain vitamins (including vitamin C) and fibre.

The ingredients for this salad vary in my kitchen according to what is in the garden or fridge, but always the main ingredient is parsnips.

This healthy, crunchy and refreshing salad combines seasonal winter vegetables with stored ingredients, and is a great way to eat home-grown parsnips.

It is best made a few hours before serving, so that the flavours can combine.

Serves 4-6

Ingredients

Salad

- 3 medium sized parsnips
- 3 medium sized carrots
- 2 pears or 2 apples (or one of each)
- 6 dates, sliced thinly (or a handful of dried cranberries, sultanas or other dried fruit of choice)

Dressing

- 6 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon maple syrup or honey
- 1 tablespoon dijon or whole grain mustard
- 1 tablespoon cider vinegar
- Zest and juice of 1 lemon (approx 3 teaspoons)
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- Sea salt and pepper, to taste

Tip:

If the parsnips are going a bit woody, cut out the cores before grating, and either use the cores in stocks, or compost them.

To serve

- Bunch of fresh parsley or coriander (3-4 tablespoons)
- A small handful of chopped nuts (eg: walnuts, peanuts, pecans) optional

Method

- Start by making the dressing. Place all of the ingredients in a clean jam jar. Replace the lid and shake vigorously. Taste and season with salt and pepper.
- Scrub the carrots and parsnips. I usually don't peel them unless they are getting old, when the peel starts to become tough.
- Wash the apples or pears.
- Grate the fruit and root vegetables using a box grater or fruit processor.
- Place in a bowl and add the dried fruit.
- Pour over the dressing a little at a time and combine carefully. You may not need all of the dressing (it will keep for a few days in the fridge). Taste and add a little more salt and pepper, if desired.
- Place in a serving dish and sprinkle over the fresh herbs and nuts (if using).
- The salad will keep for several days in the fridge.

Variations

- Replace the lemon with the juice and zest of an orange or two clementines.
- Replace the carrots with kohl rabi.

Did you know?
Parsnips are also a wonderful ingredient in baking, including muffins and cakes.

© Shutterstock

For more recipe, gardening and course information from Stephanie see **www.nodighome.com**

THE NATURAL FORAGER'S GARDEN

With expert broadcaster, author and long-standing *AG* columnist, **Anne Swithinbank**

Easy January sowings, the best blackberry hybrids and nitrogen-fixing plants

Anne explains how to give early sowings the best start and reveals some foraging garden favourites

The urge to kick-start the growing season with early sowings is hard to resist - and why should you? As long as cold-hardy crops are managed well, getting ahead is a good plan in all but the coldest regions. Unheated glass will protect from wind and rain and the golden rule while light levels are still low is sowing thinly to avoid seedling competition.

The struggle for light and space faced by thickets of seedlings forces them upwards on long, thin stems vulnerable to fungal damping off diseases. My list for unheated January sowings is a short one but includes parsley, summer cabbage, calabrese, spinach, beetroot and chard.

If you use a heated mat or propagator to help them along, don't use too much heat and remove the newly germinated seedlings promptly for steady growth. Cover sown seeds with lids at night as protection from rodents.

Anne will be sowing seed for summer parsley pickings in January

For the best garden foraging, consider grubbing out underperforming shrubs and climbers to replace them with those combining shapeliness and attractive flowers with edible fruits. Many are supplied bare rooted and must be planted between autumn and spring while dormant. Always unwrap plants as soon as they arrive and if the soil is unworkable due to frozen or waterlogged conditions, dig a trench where it is usable and sit the roots inside. Fill in and leave them 'heeled in' until conditions improve for planting properly.

If there's a growing trend in gardening, it has to be a fascination and respect for the soil microbiome; that amazing world of bacteria, fungi and other organisms busying away to make a healthy root environment for plants. Nurturing these has brought a move towards no-dig or minimal soil disturbance, mulching the surface with organic matter and moving away from the use of inorganic fertilisers. An awareness of nitrogen-fixing plants is relevant here, but what are they and how does this work? I explain all in this issue.

How to grow... parsley

Parsley, or *Petroselinum crispum*, came originally from the Mediterranean region and has a long history of cultivation and more than its fair share of folklore.

Parsley seeds take a long time to germinate and if you sow now, you'll be waiting a good six weeks. Even during the warmer months, three to four weeks is common. Maybe folk gave up on them, explaining why they believed that only witches or pregnant women could grow parsley, or that it had to be sown on Good Friday.

I've been told many times to soak a drill with boiling water prior to sowing, possibly because the seeds are said to respond well to fluctuating temperatures, but I simply fill a small seed tray with good, moist peat-free compost, smoothing and gently firming the surface. Seed is scattered thinly and evenly and then covered lightly by scattering more compost on top and firming gently again before watering very lightly, using a fine 'rose' on the can.

Covered with an old propagator lid, this stands in an unheated greenhouse (a cold frame would do) to germinate. When the true leaves show, I'll transplant the seedlings one per pot, or module, and plant out later in groups.

Anne prefers to grow curly parsley as she finds it more robust and also easy to distinguish from the poisonous umbellifers that sometimes germinate in her garden

Here in East Devon we crop from them all summer and often through to spring before plants run up to flower and seed, which is worth collecting to sow fresh, or dry and store. Flat-leaved parsley has always been the trendy one but I've never been trendy and prefer the sort with curly leaves, not least because it seems more robust. On a more sinister note, we sometimes see self-sown poisonous hemlock in our garden and as young plants, this and flat-leaved parsley could easily be confused, with fatal results. It is also said that parsley prospers only where the woman is head of the household, but you'd have to ask Mr.Swithinbank about that one!

All images unless otherwise credited: John Swithinbank

Step by step Growing parsley from seed

1 Anne likes to sow parsley under cover, early in the year. She covers seed with a little compost, gently firms it down and waters with a fine 'rose'.

2 These germinated seedlings show how by sowing thinly and evenly in a cool place, each one has the space to grow sturdily and well.

3 Transplant seedlings one per pot, or module, to grow on until plants are large enough to go outside.

4 Parsley will grow well in containers but even better in good, well-nourished soil.

Try these... Blackberry hybrid varieties

Thornless loganberry

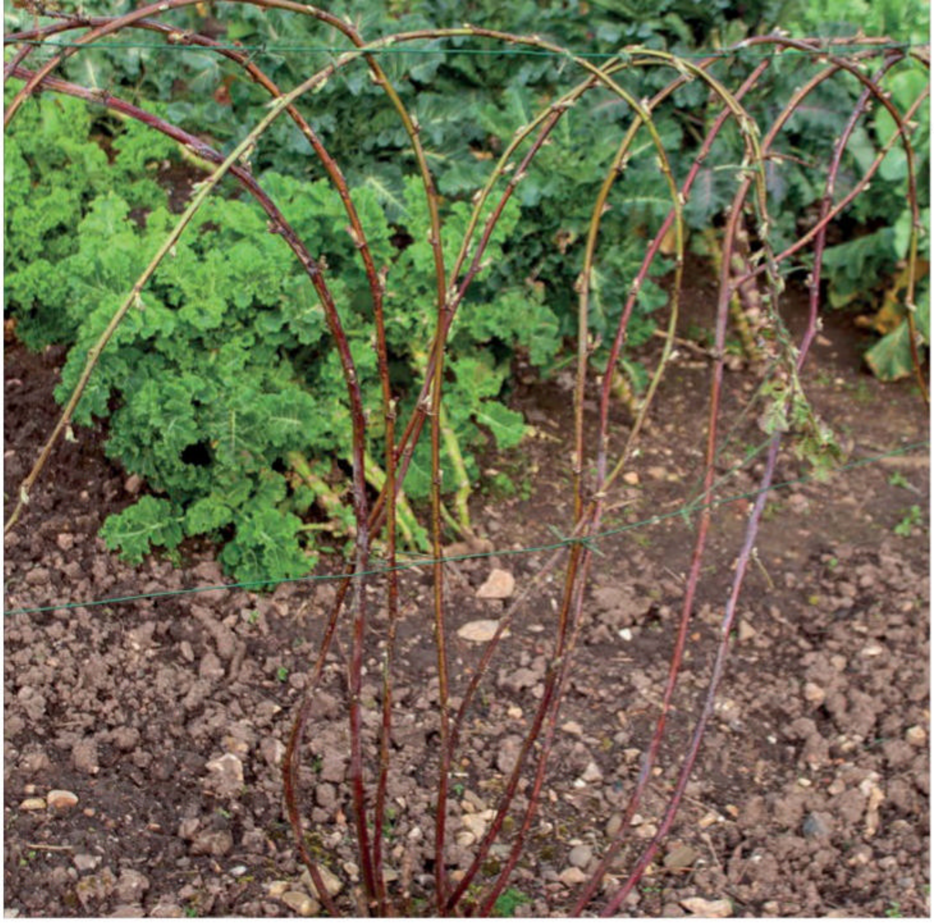
This cross between a raspberry and a North American blackberry happened by happy accident in California back in 1881. The long, juicy, purplish-red fruits are delicious but be sure to plant in well-drained soil. *www.otterfarm.co.uk*

Tayberry 'Buckingham'

This blackberry and raspberry cross was once a thorny beast but this newer hybrid is smooth stemmed yet still vigorous and productive, yielding plenty of juicy sharp-tasting fruits from July. *www.blackmoor.co.uk*

'Boysenberry'

I was once given a thorny boysenberry and found it vigorous and fruitful, bearing delicious large dark purple berries good to eat raw when fully ripe. Training the stems was never without injury and I'd definitely try the thornless option, to crop from August. *www.chrisbowers.co.uk*


A pruned and trained loganberry on parallel wires

Above: Loganberries should crop well for about ten years before they start to loose vigour

Planting blackberry hybrids as natural hedging

Recommendations are often sought for fence and wall plants, but how often does the answer include the wide range of blackberry hybrids whose flexible stems are ideal for training?

The likes of loganberries, boysenberries and tayberries open masses of pretty white or pink flowers in early summer, followed by delicious fruit. Their pruning is simplicity itself, as after flowering, the old, fruited stems are cut away and while still flexible, new ones tied in to taut parallel wires. Do choose thornless varieties, as otherwise the untangling and training is a painful job.

I favour a serpentine fashion, so that stems create structural patterns for winter. During summer you have to do something with the long, new stems and I usually anchor them to a couple of low wires below the crop. Where there's a lack of walls or fences, wires tightened between posts do just as well.

Birds often take the berries before they ripen to full sweetness, so it pays to secure mesh over the crop and take it off near the end to let the birds finish the final few.

Using plants as nitrogen fixers

Many plants from the large pea tribe originate from areas of poor soil but are able to obtain nitrogen from the air. To do this, they partner up with root bacteria (rhizobium), which are organisms able to convert nitrogen gas into plant food. The host plant allows the bacteria to live in small root nodules and take sugar from the plant, in return for fixing nitrogen. Some nitrogen leaks into the soil to benefit other plants, though the most gain comes when the legumes die and decompose. We were always told to leave the roots of peas and beans in the ground after cropping, but by this stage the root nodules are usually inactive.

In forest gardens, longer-lived nitrogen-fixing trees and shrubs such as *Robinia pseudoacacia*, alders, *Elaeagnus x ebbingei* and bog myrtle *(Myrica gale)* are planted.

Above: Peas and other members of the legume family help fix nitrogen in the soil as they break down

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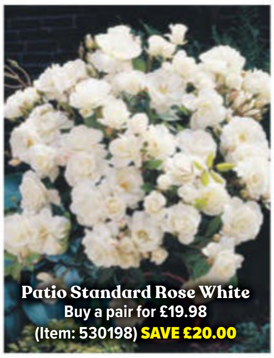

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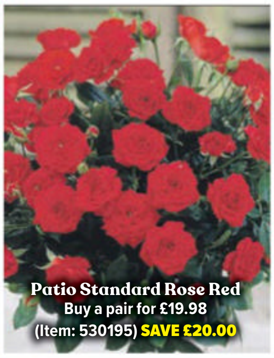

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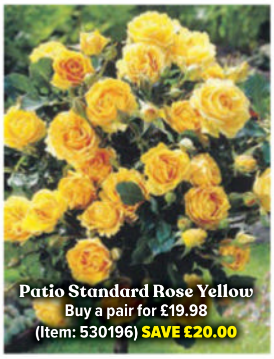

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Our award-winning editor, Kim Stoddart, explains why a subscription to Amateur Gardening makes sense:

Since our re-launch in 2023, AG has gone from strength to strength. Readers tell us how much they appreciate its mix of practical advice, money saving tips, regular features and respected columnists (including Bob Flowerdew, John Negus, Ruth Hayes and Anne Swithinbank) who supply expert gardening guidance in every issue. Readers also enjoy our focus on future-thinking and ecologically sound methods of gardening.

Subscribing to the magazine means you'll never miss an issue, plus you'll save significantly on the shop price. So why not take advantage of this special offer and make AG your 2025 constant gardening companion?"

Happy gardening,

Kim x

P.S. we were proud to be winners at the recent Garden Media Guild Awards!

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GARDENING AND WELLBEING

With **Ellen Mary**

Easy-to-make green-fingered self-care

Ellen Mary explains how to use winter days to nurture mind and body

How to grow your own self care spa day

Aloe vera has many uses

Flowing with the rhythm and energy of the seasons helps us to feel less stressed and better connected with the natural world. Modern life gives us the ability to get and do what we want at the fast touch of a button, so perhaps our patience for almost anything has waned, and we are encouraged to crave spring without properly embracing the slower pace of wintertime first. During the shorter days, rest is naturally necessary and it is enjoyable to take time to reflect and re-energise for the brighter, longer and more energetic days of spring and summer to come.

So why not embrace a winter's day, take a walk, potter in the garden and then return inside and treat yourself to an at-home spa with natural beauty products made with store cupboard items and fresh herbs from the garden or windowsill? Since winter is tough on the skin, give hard-working hands a soothing scrub and your skin a boost of moisture with these easy-to-make treatments. Then put your feet up and cherish this time of recuperation and rest.

Soothing sugar, mint and sweet almond oil hand scrub

Winter gardening hands get grubby and sore but you can remove the soil and soothe them with a natural homemade hand scrub. It's so gentle and smells wonderful. The sugar gently gets to work on dry skin, the mint is anti-inflammatory, antibacterial and antifungal, while the almond oil is both moisturising and anti-ageing. It will last at least two weeks in the fridge.

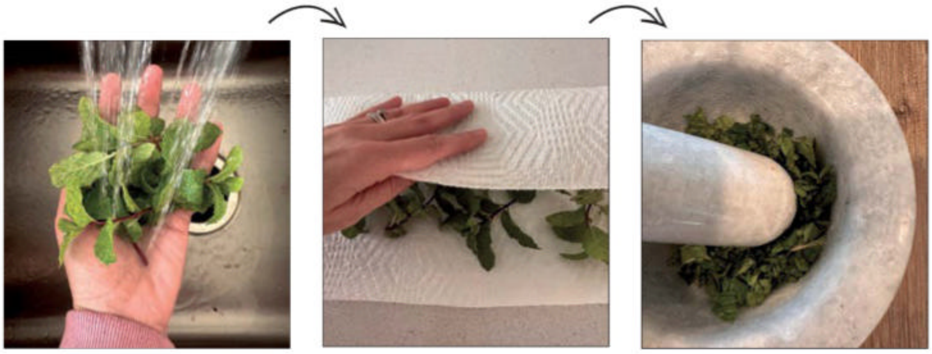
© Shutterstock

Above: Mint can be used dried or picked fresh from a plant grown indoors for this lovely home-grown hand scrub

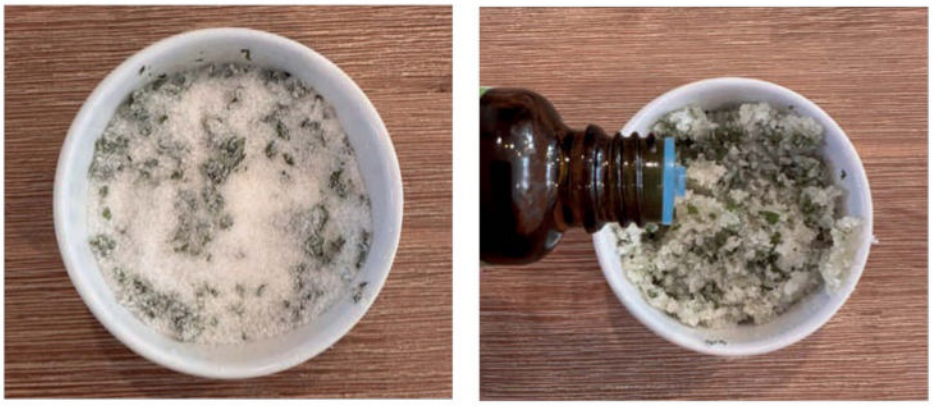
All images unless otherwise credited: Ellen Mary

Step by step

1 Gather fresh or dry mint leaves and remove any brown material.



2 Wash, dry and crush in a pestle and mortar to release the oils and scent. Make sure the leaves are broken into small pieces.



3 Add the leaves to a cup of sugar and mix well before adding a few drops of optional essential oils such as chamomile or lavender. Drop some sweet almond oil into the mixture to make it slightly wet/thick but not too wet.

4 You should be able to scoop some out easily and rub into your hands before rinsing off with warm water.

Winter mint care advice

Mint (*Mentha spicata*) is one of the easiest herbs to grow in a garden or on a windowsill. There are many varieties, from the strawberry-flavoured *Mentha x piperita* ‘Strawberry’ to *Mentha x piperita* f. *citrata* ‘Lemon’ and *Mentha arvensis* ‘Lemon’, both with a lemony flavour. For those with a sweet tooth, *Mentha × piperita f. citrata* ‘Chocolate’ offers a healthier low-calorie option.

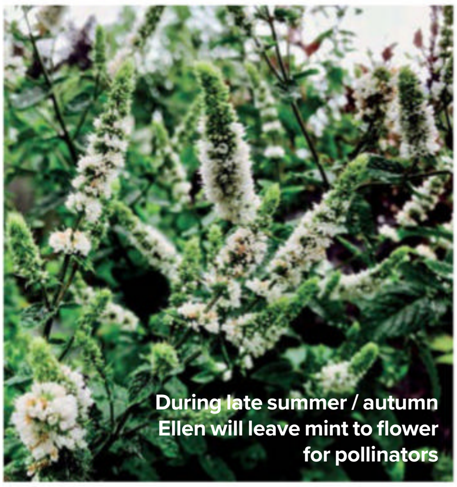
Above: Ellen grows mint all year round on her allotment and in her greenhouse over winter

Mint goes way back to Greek mythology and has since been used across the world for medicine, toiletries and cooking. It is also loved by pollinators.

Apart from it spreading everywhere with abandon unless grown in a container or a sunken bottomless pot, mint is a must for any size garden or patio.

1 I leave mint plants flowering for as long as possible into the autumn for pollinators, and then cut back before mulching. Don’t forget to harvest plenty first to use over winter - as hardy perennials they will soon grow back in spring. During a mild winter you may even be able to harvest some tasty leaves if the shoots appear again.

2 If you are growing mint in pots and would like to continue harvesting, move plants inside to a sunny, warm spot and you’ll be drinking fresh mint tea all year. Don’t overwater them, but do keep the soil moderately moist. If leaving outside, move pots to a sheltered area of the garden and in particularly cold weather use extra protection.



During late summer / autumn Ellen will leave mint to flower for pollinators

3 It’s always worth harvesting and drying leaves in summer to use over winter. Simply snip the stems and dry them by hanging up bunches, warming in an oven on a low temperature or using a dehydrator. Keep the dried leaves in airtight jars or powder them and store the same way.

▶

Ellen harvesting calendula from her allotment in the summer

Calming avocado, *Aloe vera* and calendula oil face mask

Cold wind on your face can cause dry, red skin - but nature has the answer, as did Cleopatra! The benefits of *Aloe vera* were documented in 1550BC and said to have been used by Cleopatra as a tightening, anti-aging mask. It's packed with vitamins A, C, E, B12 and amino acids and many swear by it for hydration, stimulating collagen and reducing inflammation.

Add avocado for healthy skin growth and tone, along with calendula oil for antifungal and antibacterial properties, plus so much more.

1 Mash up an avocado in a bowl until it's smooth and mix in a chunk of gel from a cutting off an *Aloe vera* leaf. Simply scrape the gel out from inside.

2 Drop in some calendula-infused oil from calendula flowers infused in a jar of sweet almond oil, stored in a cupboard for a few weeks and strained. Mix well so the face mask will stay on your face. Smooth the mask over your face and put your feet up for at least 15 minutes before rinsing off with warm water. Take a peek in the mirror and give yourself a big beautiful smile.

* try a skin test first to check for allergies.
* always check with your doctor before using any herbal/natural remedies.

Houseplant *Aloe vera* is a self-care ally

Winter care for Aloe vera

If I could only recommend one houseplant, it would be *Aloe vera* (also known as *Aloe barbadensis*). There are cold-hardy aloes that can be planted outside in the UK in a sheltered spot with well-drained soil, but for eating and using medicinally it's very important to be sure you are using *Aloe vera*, as other species can be toxic.

Originating from southern Africa, this plant has been used for thousands of years for soothing skin complaints, minor burns and even war wounds. It's full of antioxidants and is anti-inflammatory and anti-microbial.

1 Light is so important for aloes and they love to be somewhere bright and warm but without direct, hot midday sun. So placing an *Aloe vera* on a south- or east-facing window is ideal during winter where it will get the most light possible without getting scorched.

2 Aloe does need to be warm and won't like to be sitting in a draught or a really cold room. Preferring to be above 13C, make sure not to place it by a cold door or window. Having said that, more mature plants can cope much better with lower temperatures as long as they are indoors with plenty of light.

3 Drainage is key for aloe plants so make sure they are growing in a gritty compost with drainage holes in their pot. Aloe should never be overwatered because as a succulent they hold plenty of moisture in their fleshy leaves. Only water when the soil is completely dry.

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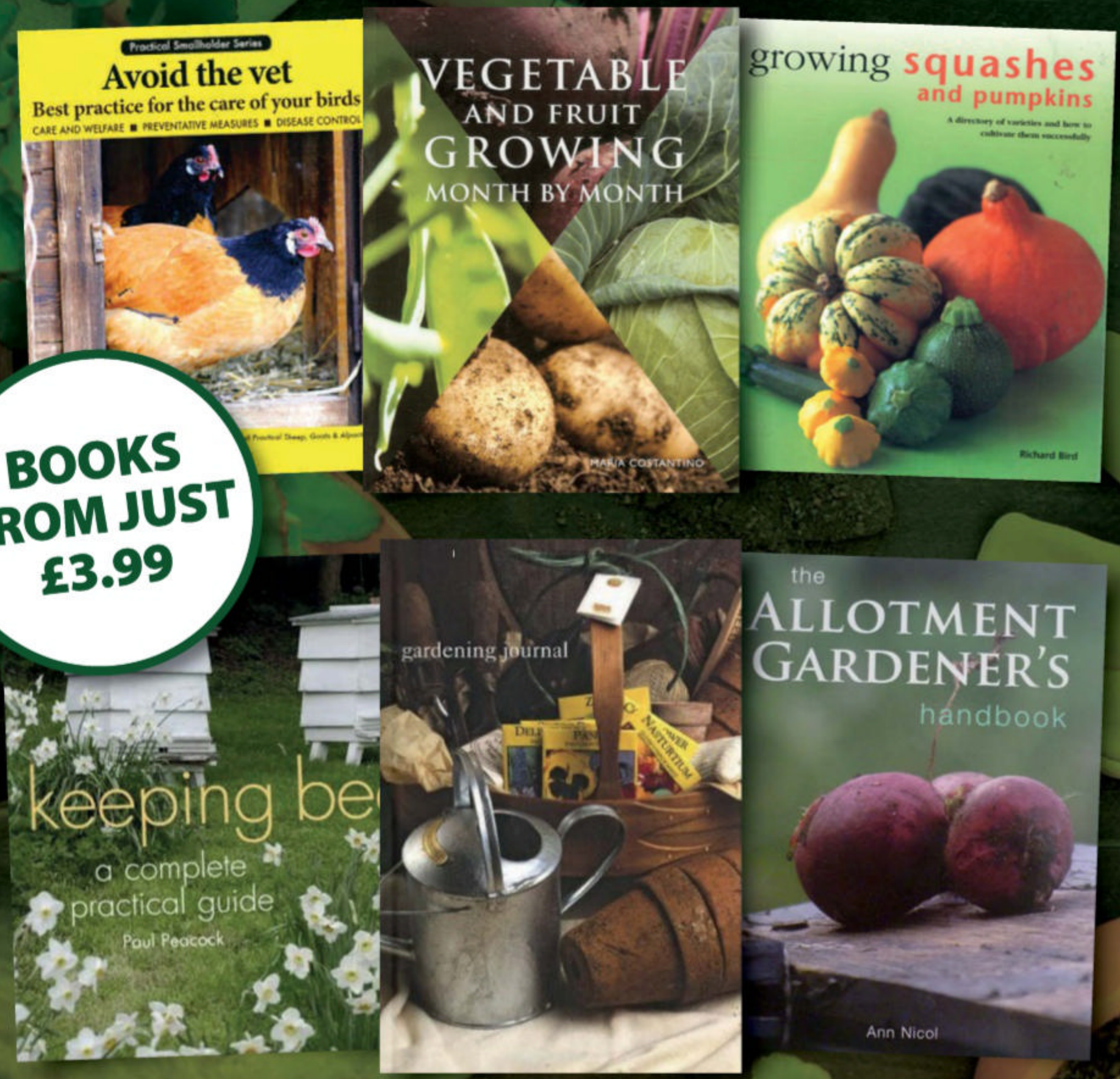
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How to repurpose old pots

Rosie Irving shares practical and creative ideas for reducing the plastic pot mountain

In this resilient gardening series I'm sharing step by step instructions on how to make useful and beautiful items for the garden with found and unwanted objects, plus a host of horticultural top tips and perfect plant combinations.

As someone undergoing treatment for cancer, I draw on my recent experiences to share with you thoughts on how these projects can benefit our collective wellbeing and happiness at a time of the year when being in the garden isn't necessarily the most appealing thought that springs to mind!

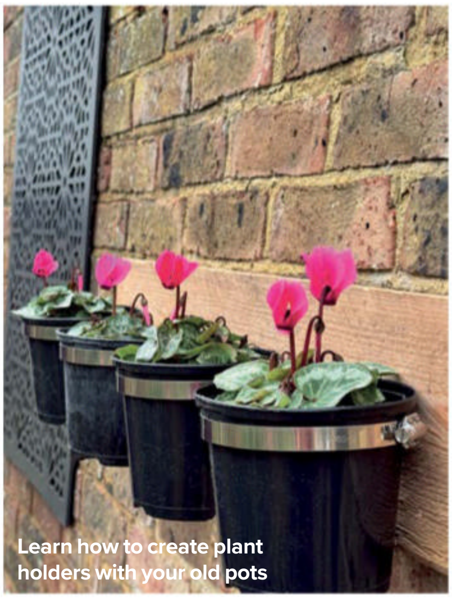
Although great efforts are being made to manufacture plant pots in sustainable materials, such as wool and cardboard, there are still many non-recyclable plastic pots in circulation.

A 2018 *Which?* Gardening report estimated there are 500 million of them out there, many un-recyclable due to containing pigments undetectable to sorting machinery.

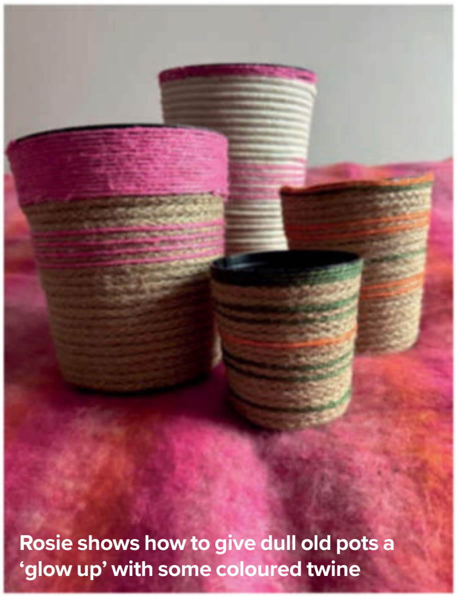
For this reason, many of us, me included, save far more of these pots than we can ever reuse for planting, so here are some handy ideas to encourage you to spend mindful moments outside, happily putting them to further use.

This issue Rosie shows you how to recycle old pots into some ingenious creations

All images unless otherwise credited: Rosie Irving


Learn how to create plant holders with your old pots

Large plastic pots can be repurposed for forcing rhubarb


Rosie shows how to give dull old pots a 'glow up' with some coloured twine

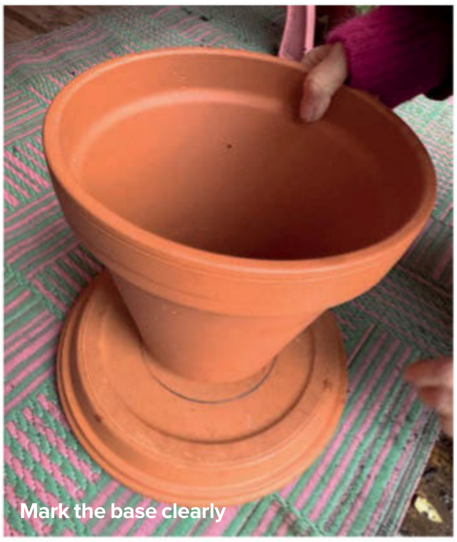
A mood-boosting bird bath

What you'll need

- Plant pot - plastic or terracotta
- Drip tray
- Pencil
- Super strength outdoor glue

Research indicates that watching garden birds can lower anxiety by giving us a stronger connection to nature.

The feeling of joy as we watch 'our' birds can boost these benefits and, with this in mind, here is a deceptively easy idea for reusing plastic or terracotta pots to create a shallow bird bath and/or insect drinking station.


Mark the base clearly

Birds and insects will flock to your drinking spot

How to make it

- Turn the drip tray upside down.
- Place the plant pot on top of the drip tray in the centre.
- Draw a line around the plant pot, remove the pot and apply a layer of glue to the underside of the drip tray following the inside of the pencil line.
- Place the drip tray onto the base of the glued pot pushing down firmly and allowing glue to set before moving the bird bath to its final position, somewhere where you can take a few mindful moments to relax and watch visiting wildlife which will, I'm sure, appreciate your aquatic gift.

Top tips

- If using a plastic pot and drip tray, make the line around the pot with a sharp knife so that it is visible. Sink the base slightly into the ground for stability and make sure the bird bath has good all-round visibility to protect birds from predators.

Rhubarb forcer

What you'll need

- A plastic plant pot around 40cm (15") to 50 cm (20") tall
- Duct tape
- One or two bricks or large stones

If you're growing rhubarb, January is a great time to start forcing a section to produce pretty, pink, deliciously sweet stems much earlier than non-forced clumps.

Doing this gives us the opportunity to go outside and be with nature, which helps us pause and simply be present in the moment - so important in a world where we're constantly bombarded with distractions.

Forced rhubarb is produced by covering a clump with a light-excluding item. Terracotta forcers were traditionally used but large plastic pots, their drainage holes covered, or old dustbins work just as well.

How to make it

- Just turn the plastic pot upside down, cover any holes with duct tape and place over the clump.
- Put one or two heavy stones or bricks on top to keep it secure.
- In about eight weeks, you should be rewarded by a cluster of beautiful, sweet-tasting, pink stems. Just lovely.

Top tips

- Adding a layer of peat-free compost to the crown before covering helps boost nutrient levels.
- Only force stems from established plants. Newly planted ones won't have enough resources to produce early stems.
- Don't be tempted to harvest any more stems from the forced clump this year. Ideally leave this section unharvested the following year to allow the plant to build up its reserves.
- 'Timperley Early' is a good early variety for this purpose.

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Block drainage holes with tape so no light can reach your rhubarb

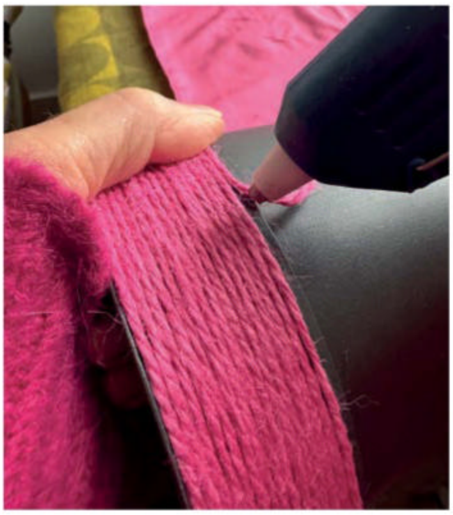
String quartet

What you'll need

- Pots - plastic or terracotta
- Glue gun
- Scissors
- Different types of cord rope and twine

Posh up your pots with rope or string and, in the process, turn them from drab to fab. One warning though, this can be seriously addictive!

There are some occasions when it's just not practical to be outside and this is a lovely mindful activity where concentrating on the task in hand can dispel any negative or sad thoughts.



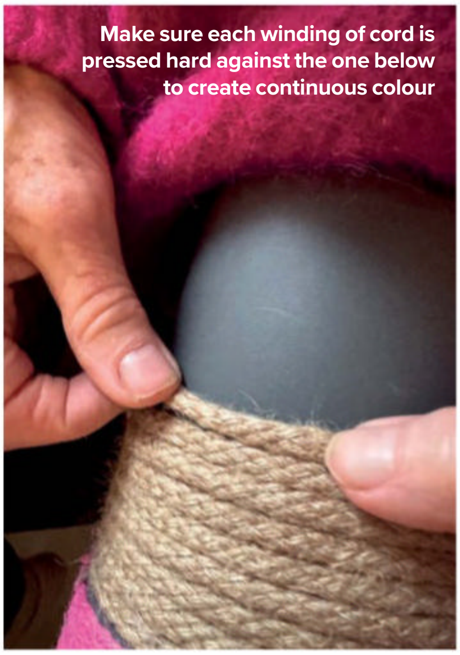
Above: Use twine to brighten old pots

How to make it

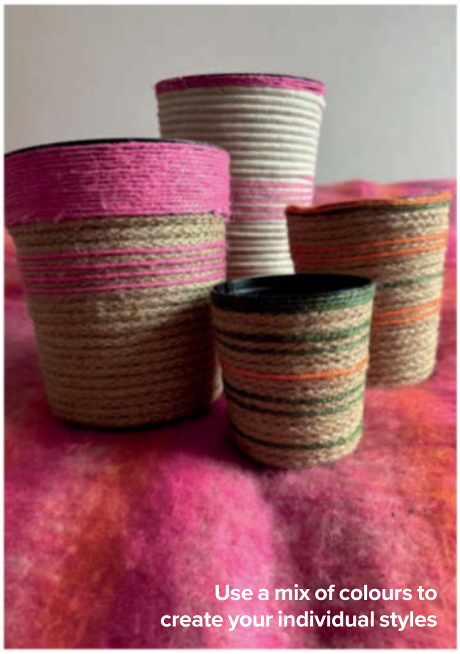
- Heat up the glue gun and choose the type of string to cover the pot.
- I used sash cord, natural and white, as, being fairly wide, it's quick and easy to cover the pot.
- Squeeze a small droplet of hot glue onto the underside of the pot rim and press the edge of the cord firmly onto the glue.
- Keep your thumb on the glued end and your forefinger on the inside of the pot.
- Use your other hand to pull the cord tightly around the remainder of the rim, pushing the cord up tight to the layer above.
- When you reach the second layer, add another drop of hot glue to the pot anywhere on that level and repeat the above process until you reach the bottom.
- Cut the end and glue it to the pot.

Top tips

- Pulling the cord taut as you wrap and keeping it pushed up against the layer above gives you the option of winding several layers before adding the next droplet of glue.
- If you've used thick rope or cord, you can add thin, coloured twine to the pot as a contrast.
- It's surprisingly easy. Just glue the end at the top of the pot onto the cord, and then push it in-between each of the cord layers, gluing only occasionally.



Make sure each winding of cord is pressed hard against the one below to create continuous colour



Use a mix of colours to create your individual styles

Rosie's string dispenser brings an end to tangled twine

Garden twine dispenser

What you'll need

- Plant pot
- Twine
- Duct tape

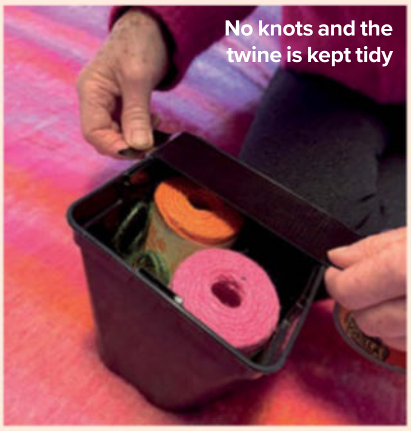
Reuse a plastic pot to solve the eternally irritating problem of entangled twine.

How to make it

- Place a ball of twine into the pot.
- Feed the end through one of the drainage holes.
- Cover the other end of the pot with layers of duct tape.

Top tip

- You can add several bundles of twine fed through different drainage holes.



No knots and the twine is kept tidy

Wall-mounted pot holders

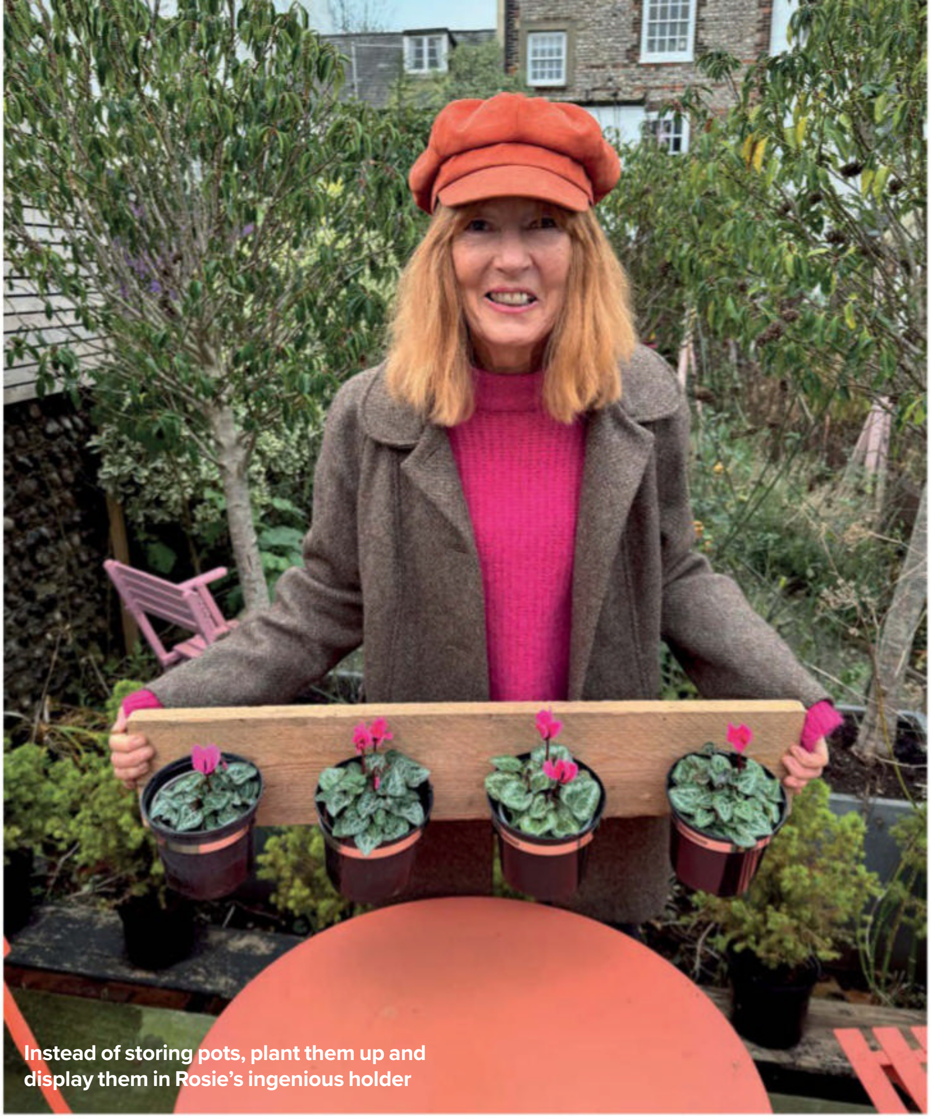
What you'll need

- Hose clips
- Flathead screwdriver
- Impact driver or Phillips screwdriver
- Wood screws
- Pencil
- Off-cut pallet wood
- Plant pots

Plastic pots make great storage containers but lack of surfaces to place them on is often an issue.

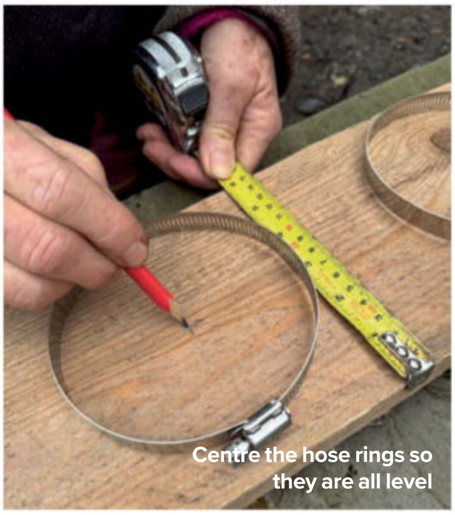
Solve that problem with hose clips screwed onto a strip of pallet wood fixed to a wall.

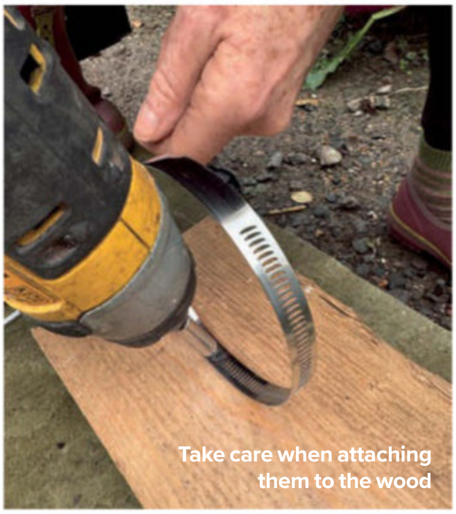
Place plant pots into the hose clips and use for either storage or, as I have done here, displaying seasonal plants.


Instead of storing pots, plant them up and display them in Rosie's ingenious holder

How to make it

- Loosen the hose clips until they reach a width where the pots drop into the centre and remain supported by the clip.
- Centre the clips along the length of wood, screw to the wood and then screw the wood to your chosen surface.


Centre the hose rings so they are all level


Take care when attaching them to the wood

Top tips

- If fixing to a brick wall: drill into the mortar not the brick.
- Pre-drill the holes, insert a raw plug into each hole and then screw through the wood into the raw plugs.

Seasonal plant choices

Spring: Auricula
Summer: Pelargonium
Autumn: Cyclamen
Late winter: Snowdrops

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The stunning snowdrop display at Painswick Rococo Garden, Painswick is just one of the Cotswold gardens recommended for a visit over the month ahead

Glorious garden visits in association with Great British Gardens

Some of this year's amazing snowdrop displays in the Cotswolds

Did you know the scientific name for galanthus, or snowdrops, means 'milk flower'? These lovely flowers are among the first to raise their heads in the new year, and when it is warm they release a fragrance.

If you take time to look carefully at the snowdrops as they flower, you can see the intricate green markings on the inside.

Did you know that soldiers were so enchanted by snowdrops that they brought them back from the Crimean War battlefields to plant in their gardens in the 1850s? The Cotswolds has some of the finest places to see snowdrops anywhere in England over the next six weeks when they are at their peak.

Here are some of the places where you can see them.

Batsford Arboretum

Just a mile outside the town of Moreton-in-Marsh in Gloucestershire, this arboretum has wonderful displays of snowdrops, accentuated by daffodils flowering at the same time.

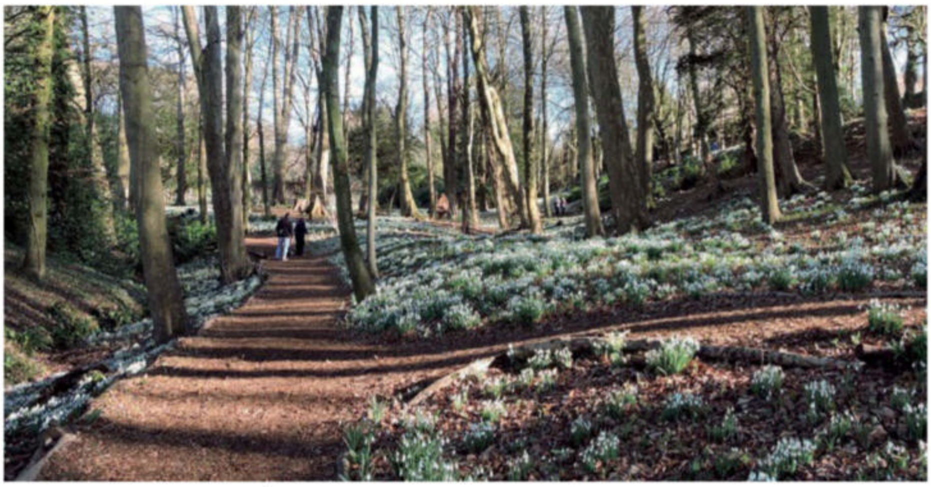
There are also lots of beautiful winter-flowering shrubs to admire and a highlight is a beautiful streamside walk bordered by snowdrops.

The arboretum is dog friendly, and has a restaurant and garden centre.

Painswick Rococo Garden, Painswick

There are massive drifts of snowdrops carpeting the woodland area and hillside in this 'Rococo' styled garden, on the edge of the Cotswolds, not too far from Stroud. The gardens are dog friendly, refreshments are available and there's a nursery.

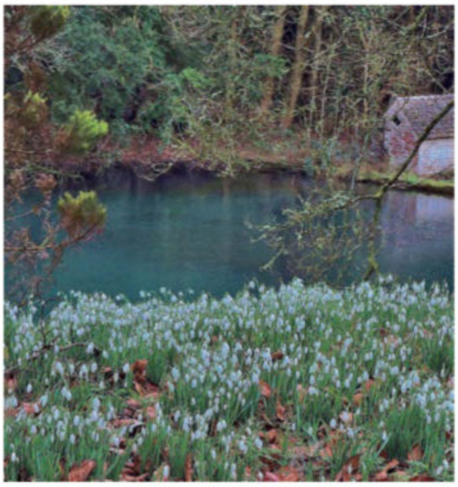
Above: Wonderful displays at Batsford Arboretum just outside Moreton-in-Marsh in Gloucestershire



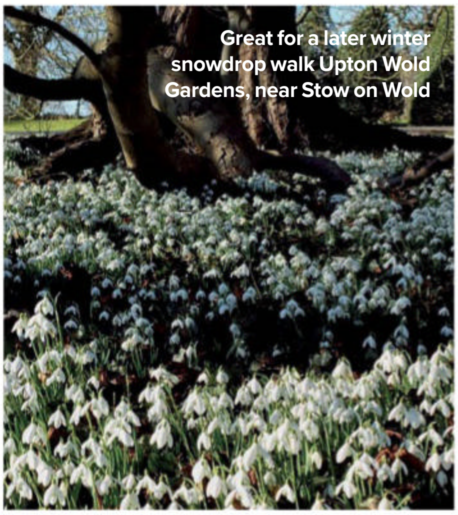
Massive drift of snowdrops at Painswick Rococo Garden, on the edge of the Cotswolds

All images © Great British Gardens

More than 300 snowdrop varieties at Colesbourne Park near Cirencester



A hidden gem with wonderful snowdrop and winter aconite displays Newark Park, near Wotton-under-Edge



Great for a later winter snowdrop walk Upton Wold Gardens, near Stow on Wold

Colesbourne Park near Cirencester

Snowdrops and cyclamen are the stars of this delightful parkland setting, with an unusual turquoise lake.

The collection of snowdrops growing here is probably the most varied of any garden on display, with more than 300 varieties of this spectacular harbinger of spring on show during the short season.

Refreshments are available.

Stunning snowdrop-laden woodland walk at Cerney House Gardens near Cirencester

Above: Wonderful collection of snowdrops, crocuses and winter aconites at Lacock Abbey near Chippenham

Upton Wold Gardens, near Stow-on-the-Wold

This amazing garden is open for snowdrop displays in February and is the perfect place for a late winter walk - especially as the gardens are dog friendly. It also has one of the largest collections of walnut trees in Europe.

Cerney House Gardens near Cirencester

Known for its beautiful brick-walled garden, Cerney House also has a stunning array of snowdrops on its woodland walk.

It is dog friendly and has a self-service tearoom in the Gardener's Cottage where you can enjoy tea, coffee and homemade cakes.

Newark Park, near Wotton-under-Edge

Newark Park, set deep in Gloucestershire on the edge of the Cotswolds, is a hidden gem that has wonderful displays of snowdrops and winter aconites in February.

The house was a hunting lodge before being upgraded to a house in the late 18th century, which is when its pleasure grounds are likely to have been created, along with a serpentine lake, a folly and attractive walks.

Newark Park, a National Trust property, is dog friendly and refreshments are available.

Lacock Abbey near Chippenham

A National Trust property, Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire is a must for its delightful displays of snowdrops, crocuses and winter aconites in February and early March.

You can follow various paths within the grounds to make the most of your time there.

Lacock Abbey is set in the beautiful village of Lacock, which is famous as a location and setting for period dramas including the highly acclaimed BBC series *Wolf Hall* and also some of the *Harry Potter* films.

Refreshments are available in the nearby café.

Great British GARDENS

For all you need to know about these gardens, plus 70 more places across England, Scotland and Wales, visit www.greatbritishgardens.co.uk/seasonal/snowdrops or scan the QR code below on your smartphone.

Your LETTERS TO KIM

Your lovely letters, emails and social media posts continue to flow in beautifully. Every message, poem, idea and comment matters. Please keep them coming. We will send out a thank you gift for every item published in the magazine so do please send your address and contact details when you get in touch.

A novel planter idea

Hello Kim
Recently I discovered hopper gardening.

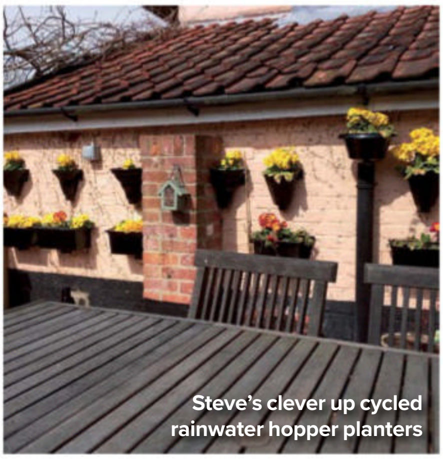
I buy old cast iron rainwater hoppers from my local auction house, clean them and paint them glossy black. I fill the outlet at the bottom with crocks plus a piece of wire mesh, which holds the compost in place and gives good drainage.

I then fill the hopper with compost and plants; they make great displays, looking good on their own and in groups.

They are in use the whole year as I change the plants seasonally.

Kind regards
Steve Hudson

Kim says; thank you for sharing this creative idea Steve. What a great way to make use of these hoppers, and they look lovely in your display. I wonder if readers have any other unusual planter ideas they can share? We'd love to hear.



Steve's clever up cycled rainwater hopper planters

Chickens and chicks

Hello Kim,
I hope that you like this photo of Beatrice our bantam hen.

Last year she hatched six little chicks and was such a good mum, making sure that they were tucked up all snug under her wing each night

Mrs Tina C Vowles

Kim says; what a lovely photograph of Beatrice, she looks very proud indeed. It's a nice warming image for this time of year. As a chicken keeper myself I'd like to take this opportunity to ask readers to let me know if they would like a feature on any aspect of chicken or duck keeping in 2025. If so, please write or message in and let us know.

Competition time

We have two £500 Kent & Stowe tool bundles up for grabs!

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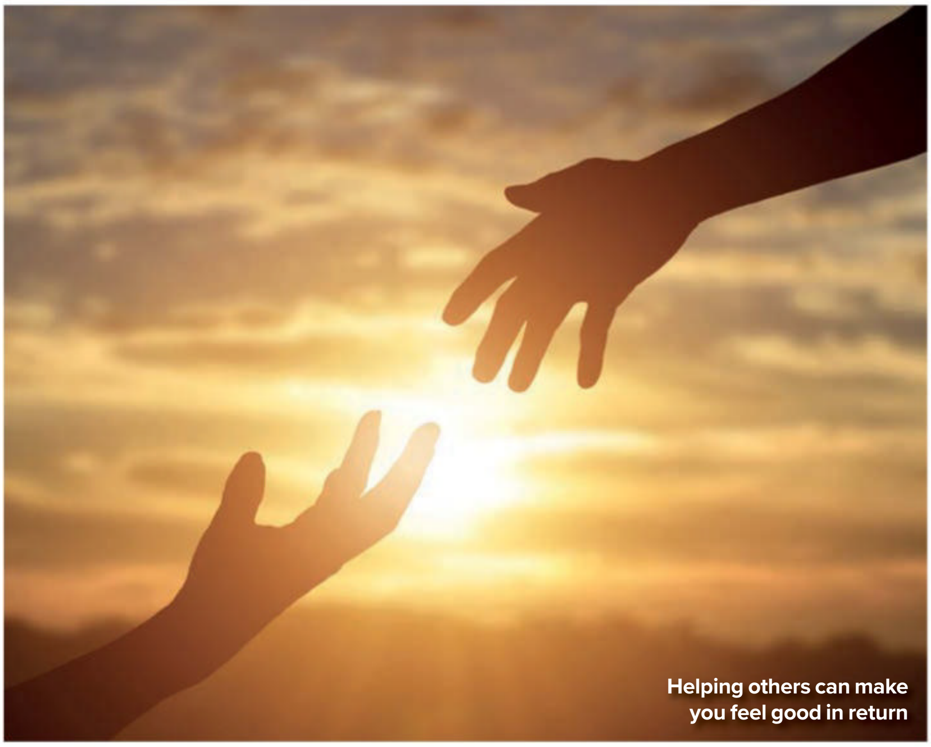
Helping others can make you feel good in return

Give back and help others

Dear Kim
Love the new look *Amateur Gardening*. Well done to all, very interested in the way reuse, recycle and restore blends with the eco-friendly outlook without being too prescriptive.

Sorry to hear about your power outage, but as you say, Mother Nature has a way of reminding us of our responsibilities to our planet.

The reason for this email is to share my new year resolution.

As a long term home gardener, sharing your outlook of sustainability and eco savy gardening, my new year resolution is to contribute more to various charities to help others through gardening. I believe this to be an opportunity to combine charitable activities with eco initiatives, particularly for children and animals. And there are many out there, so which one and how?

Well, maybe I should go out and discover the opportunities and refresh people's knowledge of the ways to become more involved with those less fortunate and contribute to eco-friendly activities?

Anyway, keep up the good work, if you are interested in my meanderings let me know.

John Michael Edwards
Poole, Dorset

Kim says; what a lovely letter and intention for the new year, John. We are very interested in your meanderings and I was wondering also if other readers can suggest ideas to also give back and help others this year?

Please send us your letters, poems and musings

Your contribution is such an important part of this magazine for the future.

AG is for you the people, for gardeners and proud custodians of gardens everywhere, so please do write in. We will send a gift for each letter, poem and musing published.

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Your GARDENING TEA BREAK

Gardening's king of trivia and brain-teasers, **Graham Clarke**

Gardening and the poets!

AG receives lots of reader poetry of a gardening flavour, and these poems are often included on the Letters pages. You may therefore be interested to know that 25th January is Burns Night, celebrating the birth, in 1759, of the person widely regarded as Scotland's 'national poet'. His most famous poem with a gardening connection is *A Red, Red Rose*.

- Many believe that Burns is also responsible for the ditty "Roses are red, Violets are blue, Sugar is sweet, And so are you", but the author of this isn't known. Actually, its origins have been traced back as far as 1590!

The most famous gardening poem

English poet Dorothy Frances Gurney (1858-1932) is credited for writing arguably the most famous poem about the garden. It is actually the second-to-last verse of her poem *God's Garden* that we are most familiar with, and it is frequently seen on signs and garden ornaments:

The kiss of the sun for pardon,
The song of the birds for mirth,
One is nearer God's Heart in a garden
Than anywhere else on Earth.

Wow! I didn't know that...

- Edward Thomas (1878-1917), one of the World War I poets, wrote a poem called *Celandine*. Encountering the flower in the field, the poet is reminded of a past love, now dead.
- *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* is the actual name of the poem by Wordsworth, but most of us know it simply as *Daffodils*. It was inspired by the time, in 1802, when he and his sister Dorothy came across a "long belt" of daffodils around Glencoyne Bay, Ullswater, in the Lake District.
- Lots of modern-day garden plants are named after poets, including a cultivar of bergamot (*Monarda* 'Shelley'), the Sir John Betjeman ('Ausvivid') and Lord Byron ('Meitosier') roses, *Narcissus* 'Barrett Browning', and *Rhododendron* 'Samuel Taylor Coleridge'.

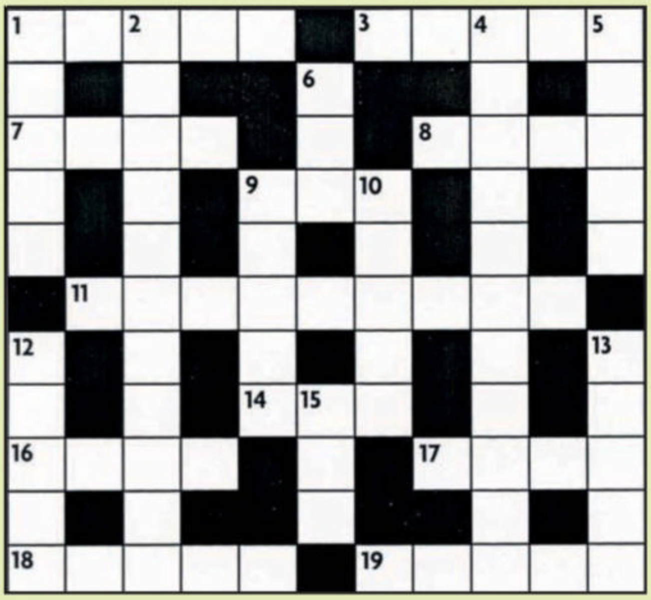
This fortnight in gardening history 21 January – 3 February

24 January 1684 The weather in London was so cold on this day that diarist and horticultural writer John Evelyn wrote that the Thames was frozen, with "the fowls, fish and birds and all our exotic plants and greens universally perishing".

28 January 1993 Arthur Hellyer, the fourth editor of *AG* (a post he held for 21 years, from 1946 to 1967), passed away at the age of 91. He had written more than 100 influential gardening books, and millions of words during his time on *AG*, as well as in its then sister magazine *Country Life*.

2 February 1996 Flamingoes in the garden of Buckingham Palace, which had been hitherto protected on an island in the middle of a lake, were killed by a fox. It had walked over the frozen lake to get to them.

Crossword... *just for fun!*



ACROSS
1 The sedge genus (5)
3 The hollyhock genus (5)
7 Sailor's call upon sighting the hoya plant! (4)
8 You do this down in the greenhouse to raise humidity in hot summer weather! (4)
9 When this falls, one feels the chop! (3)
11 The so-called 'hot-water plant' genus (9)
14 Chinese and Japanese liquid sauce for fish, made by subjecting many boiled beans to fermentation in salt water (3)
16 Even in the depths of winter, garden birds will take one of these! (4)
17 The Root Disease of Brassicas Association! (4)
18 The flax genus (5)
19 Sky-high object – and a cultivar of both *Crocosmia* × *crocosmiiflora* and *Galanthus elwesii*! (5)

DOWN
1 Common name for many forms of salvia, and especially *S. pratensis* (5)
2 The hollyhock genus (11)
4 The chamomile genus (11)
5 Type of fruit cart one is told not to upset! (5)
6 Begonia species famous for being a large-leave houseplant (3)
9 The fir tree genus (5)
10 Abrasive paper or board used to remove material from surfaces, as in the cultivar of *Pinus thunbergia* – '______'s Dwarf' (5)
12 A flat-topped flower, such as of the achillea family (5)
13 The main way this is currently used in the garden, is as a solar-powered, free-moving, grass-cutting machine (5)
15 Quercus is the ____ tree genus (3)

ANSWERS TO CROSSWORD ABOVE
ACROSS 1 Carex 3 Alcea 7 Ahoy 8 Damp 9 Axe 11 Achimenes 14 Soy 16 Bath 17 Club 18 Linum 19 Comet **DOWN** 1 Clary 2 Rhodochiton 4 Chamaemelum 5 Apple 6 Rex 9 Abies 10 Emery 12 Umbel 13 Robot 15 Oak

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Seven canny comeback plants

Mike Palmer shares his predictions for plants that deserve our love again

Mike believes conifers could be set for a comeback

If flared jeans, brown and orange kipper ties, wedge shoes and The Dooleys were to make a comeback, I'd be the coolest kid on the block – I use the term 'kid' loosely, of course. And, as many things from previous times tend to have a resurgence in popularity, I'm ready to raid the bottom drawer of my bedroom cupboard and my vinyl collection!

Cutting-edge fashion rolls in on high tides, before drawing out, all too quickly, on a tired and saturated outgoing ebb-tide. It's not just clothes and music though, as cars, colours, homeware and even plants are at the mercy of a population intent on possessing trending chattels.

I remember my Uncle Jack tending a pristine platoon of kaleidoscopically coloured dahlias in his front garden in the seventies and, purely coincidentally, the demise of this favourite uncle saw the dwindling popularity of dahlias, deemed suddenly too old fashioned, with their frou-frou blooms and psychedelic petals.

Fast forward to the early 2000s and, thanks to television and social media, we can't get enough of them again and, of course, we'll no doubt move on to revive and re-love other plants long overdue a comeback. These are my favourites please do share with us other plants you'd love to see on the comeback trail.

Conifers

Sadly, we probably all conjure up the horrors of the mountainous-growing monster that is leylandii (*Cupressus × leylandii*). Rinse that nightmare from your memory and make friends with the Japanese cedar, *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Little Sonja'.

This diminutive conifer, a tousled, oversized pom-pom of 'crocheted' mid-green to the palest green-tipped fingers, grows to approximately 50cm (1.3ft) in 10 years, and will give of its best in full sun to part-shade in most soil types and containers. A cold winter will encourage burnished bronze foliage.

Another come-back conifer deserving of a second chance is *Abies koreana*, the perfect conical focal point for a larger garden. Reminiscent of a charismatic Christmas tree, (a Christmas tree isn't just for Christmas!) it possesses dense, pea-green needles and, when mature, gorgeous lavender-grey cones which sit proudly along its branches.

You'll have the neighbours making excuses to borrow a cup of sugar, just to gain a closer look.

▶

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Pretty *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Little Sonja' is one of Mike's favourite conifers

© Shutterstock

Even in winter, the antique blooms of *Hydrangera macrophylla* make a sensational statement

The flowers of *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Wims Red' slowly turn red during the season

Hydrangeas

In recent years I've been telling anyone who will listen that hydrangeas are long overdue another heyday. Easy to grow, with soil type determining whether the blowsy mophead blooms of *Hydrangea macrophylla* will be blue, purple or pink, they sing out from partially shaded borders, standing at approximately 2m (6.5ft) in a reliably moist soil. I've even noted the odd mophead hydrangea tucked away, sometimes discreetly, in gardens on RHS Chelsea Flower Show's Main Avenue in recent years, so it won't be long before they're mainstreaming in our borders again.

Deciduous *Hydrangea paniculata* is leading the comeback charge, with popular *H.* 'Annabelle', 'Vanilla Fraise' and my favourite, *H.* 'Wim's Red' making increasingly valuable contributions to borders across the nation already. Watch this space and remember who told you first!

Pampas grass

Maybe I'm a little naïve, but I've been told there's a, how shall I put it, a certain 'connotation' linked to this elegant, although somewhat oversized, ornamental grass, once very popular in the seventies - but I'm having none of that on my watch!

Pampas grass, *Cortaderia selloana*, is a majestic grass with towering, parchment-coloured, feather-like blooms rising above course, narrow, foliage.

I've planted *Cortaderia* Tiny Pampa ('Day1') in borders and large containers, and growing to just 0.5-1m (1.6-3.2ft) high, it's drought tolerant once it's established.

In early spring, a 'short back and sides' will result in fresh foliage before the emergence of perfect plumes in summer.

'Why do you whisper green grass,' the song lyric said, but I'm not whispering, I'm shouting from the rooftops – a pampas grass renaissance is required!

Shasta daisies

Oxeye daisies, *Leucanthemum vulgare*, with their delicate, white-fringed blooms with a golden button nose standing proud in the centre, naturalise and spread in stunning swathes in grassy knolls and alongside motorway verges, reminiscent of a galaxy of twinkling stars.

Their better-behaved and less intrusive cousin the Shasta daisy, *Leucanthemum* x *superbum*, is another once-popular garden treasure that I adore.

Long-flowering, resilient and with a wide-range of flower types, including single, semi-double and full-on flouncy double, they also vary in height from 40-150cm (1.3-5ft), allowing plantings from front to back border and containers.

My favourite, the shaggy mop that is *Leucanthemum* x *superbum* 'Phyllis Smith' is perfect mid-border, but for containers, consider the comparatively petite, *L.*x *superbum* 'Snow Lady'.

The feather-like inflorescences of *Cortaderia* Tiny Pampa

Petite and perfect for containers Shasta daisy *L.* x *superbum* 'Snow Lady'

© Shutterstock

The tousled white petals of *Leucanthemum* x *superbum* 'Phyllis Smith'

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Above: The cottage garden classic hollyhocks are set for a comeback believes Mike

Hollyhocks

In Victorian England, sending someone a hollyhock was a way to signify one's aspirations and dreams for the future. As such, I'm sending you a virtual hollyhock to share my dreams that this statuesque cottage garden biennial is standing tall once more in our borders.

'But what about hollyhock rust?' I hear you call. Personally, I've never let that bother me, but there are rust-resistant, although not rust-proof, varieties including the popular Spotlight Series.

The towering, sunshine-lemon and cream cupcake blooms of *Alcea rosea* 'Polarstar' are simply breathtaking, and in contrast, if your preference is for brooding, mysterious and sultry, then be sure to check out the dark purple blooms of *A.* 'Blacknight' with its pale-yellow throat.

Hollyhocks add height, approximately 1.2-2.5m (3.2-6.5ft), along with structure and elegance to the back of a border, preferring a well-drained, moderately fertile soil in full sun. My rather windy back garden requires me to stake mine, but for the time being, I'll sit and wait quietly for them to curry favour with all of us again – which they will, I assure you.

Other comeback contenders

Hedging my bets and gazing deeply one last time into the swirling mists within my crystal ball, call me Mystic Mike if you like, I have just two last beautiful 'bring-back' possibilities.

The sun-loving *Callistemon citrinus* 'Splendens' with its stunning showy red, bottlebrush blooms are, sadly, seldom seen these days, but always attract much attention, and, finally, *Calendula officinalis*, or pot marigolds, which I grow from seed every year. Half-hardy, pretty annuals in shades of red, orange, yellow, and mango. Go on, treat yourself!

The bottlebrush flowers of *Callistemon citrinus* 'Splendens' make an attractive focal point

© Shutterstock

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The towering spires of the breathtaking hollyhock, *Alcea rosea* 'Polarstar'

Pretty and pot marigolds *Calendula officinalis* deserve more space in our gardens believes Mike

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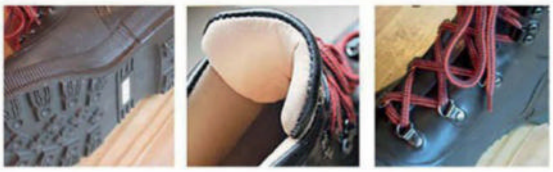

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TRIED AND TESTED

With **Adam Kirtland**

Which products or projects would you like Adam to cover and trial in his column? Please contact **editor@amateurgardening.com** with suggestions.

Great garden footwear

If the boot fits then you're good to go gardening!

The Fergie boot by Merry People is perfect for gardening and muddy walks

I've always thought that every gardener needs two things: a good pair of secateurs and some trusty outdoor footwear, so over the past year I've tried numerous different boots and shoes and have finally come up with my suggestions for not only you, but your family as well.

Slip on shoes

I often find that I want to quickly run out into the garden at times, without needing to find bigger boots, or ones that need to be laced up, and the perfect way to do just that is with a quick slip on shoes designed for that exact purpose. Backdoorshoes® have absolutely come up with the ideal solution to that specific problem with their slip-on clogs, and they've added an element of fun to the finish too. Not only are they spectacularly comfortable, a breeze to pop on and durable to boot, but they come in a rather snazzy range of colours, patterns and designs.

Entirely waterproof, these clogs are created with comfort in mind while enabling a swift on-and-off when you need them most. Unlike some other clogs, these have a slightly higher back which stops your feet and socks getting soggy when walking on grass.

Available from www.backdoorshoes.co.uk, from £34.95

Lamb Boots

If you're looking for a similar amount of ease, but you're planning on a more rigorous bit of activity in the garden, then you'll want to start looking for a boot of some sort.

For me and my wife, the range available from Lamb Boots is tough to beat. I've been wearing and using Lamb for a while now, but the Birch range is a recent addition to our household and particularly the veg print design is new for us.

My wife has been using these for the past few months and I'm pleased to say that she's been joining me in the garden more and more as a result! Rather than being a solid boot, the neoprene top layer makes them far more comfortable than others on the market, while the rubber outside ensures that mud doesn't penetrate through and reach your feet.

The thing that really elevates these, though, is the fact that they have a steel 'shank' that goes right the way along the sole to support your feet while you're working.

Available from www.lambboots.com, with an RRP of £79

Wellington boots

Away from gardening, if you go on lots of muddy walks, then a good, tall Wellington-style boot is in order for that particular task. The folk at Merry People have perfected the ultimate design with their Fergie boot, the tallest boot in their range, and aptly named after the tallest recorded Ferguson tree in Victoria, Australia.

A slightly more fashionable take on the conventional Wellington boot of yesteryear, the Fergie has a long form and a good chunky heel which is not only good for a mud-soaked country walk, but great for getting your spade or fork in the frozen ground.

See https://uk.merrypeople.com for the full range, starting at £114

Footwear for the kids

And finally, I've covered options for the adults of the house but what about the children? While I'm out in the garden, my children often are too and they're as guilty as me for running out without shoes on, resulting in endless socks with holes in them, so thank heavens for Town & Country's Kids Fleecy Cloggies®.

These lightweight clogs are simple to grab and come with a supportive ankle strap and slip-resistant sole. They give tiny feet the warmth and cosiness they need when playing outdoors.

When they're inevitably covered in mud, wipe clean with a damp cloth and they're good to go once more.

Available in either a fleecy finish or without the lining, they come in blue or pink and are very reasonably priced.

Find out more at www.townandco.com. Fleecy Cloggies® have an RRP of £7.99 and the ones without fleece retail for £6.99

For more gardening advice, tips, and DIY projects, you can follow Adam on Instagram **@viewfromthepottingbench**

GROWING FROM SEED

with **Ruth Hayes**, AG's gardening expert

A traditional favourite for pots and border edges

These tiny seeds will give the garden huge results

Above: *Begonia semperflorens* can be tricky to sow but are worth the effort

It's never too early to start planning your summer containers and baskets, so this week I'm going to be sowing the seeds of an old favourite - *Begonia semperflorens*.

These cute little dots of colour, which are also known as wax begonias, have long been favoured by gardeners but they disappeared for several years because older varieties were prone to diseases.

Resistant varieties have now been cultivated and they are thankfully back with a bang, bringing joy and colour to gardens everywhere.

Begonia semperflorens are perennials but usually treated as annuals and composted at the end of summer, though with care and a frost-free place it is possible to nurse them through the coldest months.

Start sowing them from now through to early spring, scattering the seeds as thinly as you can on top of a tray of sieved and dampened seed compost.

Begonia seeds are as small as dust, so after sowing they should not be covered with compost or vermiculite, and the tray should be sealed in a clear plastic bag and placed somewhere warm and light, because it is the seasonal gloom at this time of year that causes seedlings to grow pale and thin.

Seeds this small can be tricky to sow evenly. To make it easier I either mix them with a little horticultural sand in my palm and sprinkle them a pinch at a time onto the compost, or I dampen the end of a match, dip it into the seeds so it picks up a few at a time and tap them off over the compost.

Germination can take two to three weeks, after which you should remove the bag to let air circulate around your growing seedlings. They can be potted on when large enough to handle safely.

Make sure you keep the compost damp, watering from the base and avoiding wetting the leaves.

Jolly hollyhocks

- Just up the road from where we live is a cottage that always has the most amazing display of hollyhocks in its front garden.
- In a range of delicious shades, they tower over passers-by and are a delight to see.
- Our hollyhocks do OK, but not as well as the ones down the road, possibly because we live at the top of a hill and the garden is often blasted by winds.
- So this year I'm going to satisfy my appetite for hollyhocks by growing a variety called 'Majorette Mixed', which only grows to around 90cm (3ft) tall, making plants more weather resilient and perfect for the middle or front of the border.
- 'Majorette Mixed' come in shades of pink and the flowers are multi-petalled, giving them a 'fluffy' look.
- Sown now on trays or pots of good quality dampened seed compost, they should flower this summer and, like all hollyhocks, keep going well into the autumn.
- Your seedlings can be potted on when they have developed two sets of 'proper' leaves and they should be planted out in late spring after being hardened off.

Dwarf hollyhocks can be more weather resistant →

What's On

24 Jan: Snowdrop Festival at the Garden House – with plant sales from Somerset-based Elworthy Cottage Plants, at The Garden House. Buckland Monachorum, Yelverton, Devon, PL20 7LQ. 10.30am-3.30pm. Snowdrop festival at The Garden House continues until Sunday March 16. Visit www.thegardenhouse.org.uk/whats-on/snowdrop-festival for more details.

25 Jan: Myddleton House Gardens Ultimate Snowdrop Sale,Myddelton House Gardens, Bulls Cross, Enfield, Middlesex, EN2 9HG. 10.30am-noon.

25-26 Jan: Orchid Festival, Gordale Garden Centre, Chester High Road (A540), Burton, South Wirral, Cheshire, CH64 8TF. 9am-6pm Sat, 11am-5pm Sun.

25 Jan: Snowdrop Gala and other Spring Treasures, Ballykealey House, Ballon, Co. Carlow. Ireland, R93 A9K1. From noon.

25, 27, 29 & 31 Jan: Shirley Carman-Martin's Snowdrop Garden, 5 Whitemans Close, Cuckfield, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, RH17 5DE. 11am-3.30pm. Pre-bookings only, email shirleycarmanmartin@gmail.com.

25-26 Jan: Celebrating Stroud Snowdrops, Museum in the Park, Stratford Park, Stroud, Gloucestershire, GL5 4AF. 10am-4.30pm.

25 Jan: Borgue Potato Day and Seed Swap, Borgue Village Hall, Borgue, Dumfries & Galloway, Scotland, DG6 4SH. 11am-3pm.

25 Jan: Nottingham Organic Gardeners' Potato Day, United Reform Church, 1 Edwards Lane, Nottingham, NG5 3AA. 10am-3pm.

25-26 Jan: Houseplant Weekend, RHS Garden Rosemoor, Torrington, Devon, EX38 8PH. 10am-4pm.

25 Jan: Bridport Seed Swap, Bridport Community Shed, Mountfield, Near Bedford Place, Bridport, Dorset, DT6 3JP. 10am to noon.

25 Jan: Transition Chesterfield's Potato Day & Seed Swap, Pavements Shopping Centre, Chesterfield, Derbyshire, East Midlands, S40 1PA. 9.30am-1pm.

26 Jan: Spring Platt Garden Opening, Boyton Court Road, Sutton Valence, Maidstone, Kent, ME17 3BY. 10.30am-3pm.

26 Jan: Trumpington Seedy Sunday, Trumpington Village Hall, 75 High Street, Trumpington, Cambridgeshire, CB2 9HA. 1.30pm-4pm.

Dates and times are correct when going to press. Thanks to **pumpkinbeth.com** for the listings - check her site for more details. Please send us details of your events at least six weeks in advance to **editor@amateurgardening.com** Always check events are going ahead before leaving home.

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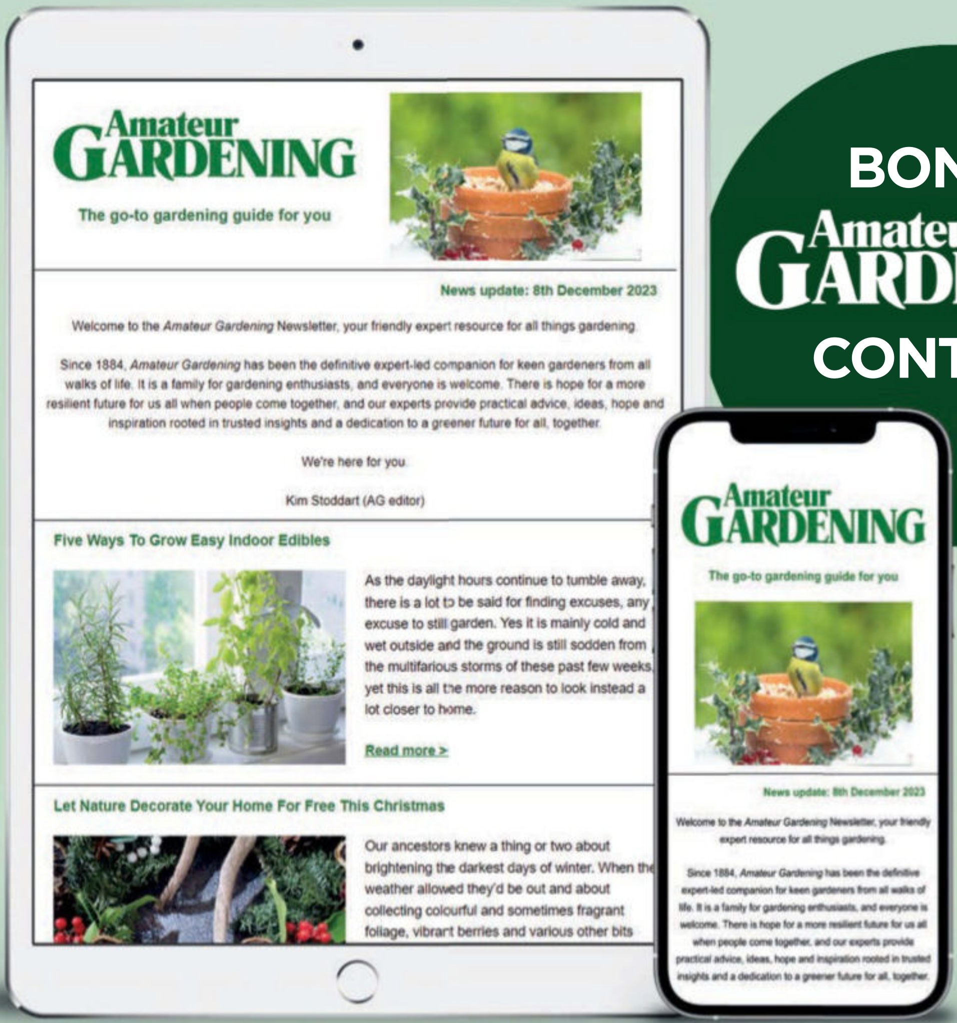

Amateur GARDENING

The go-to gardening guide for you

News update: 8th December 2023

Welcome to the *Amateur Gardening* Newsletter, your friendly expert resource for all things gardening.

Since 1884, *Amateur Gardening* has been the definitive expert-led companion for keen gardeners from all walks of life. It is a family for gardening enthusiasts, and everyone is welcome. There is hope for a more resilient future for us all when people come together, and our experts provide practical advice, ideas, hope and inspiration rooted in trusted insights and a dedication to a greener future for all, together.

We're here for you

Kim Stoddart (AG editor)

Five Ways To Grow Easy Indoor Edibles

As the daylight hours continue to tumble away, there is a lot to be said for finding excuses, any excuse to still garden. Yes it is mainly cold and wet outside and the ground is still sodden from the multifarious storms of these past few weeks, yet this is all the more reason to look instead a lot closer to home.

Read more >

Let Nature Decorate Your Home For Free This Christmas

Our ancestors knew a thing or two about brightening the darkest days of winter. When the weather allowed they'd be out and about collecting colourful and sometimes fragrant foliage, vibrant berries and various other bits

Amateur GARDENING

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BONUS Amateur GARDENING CONTENT

HEAD TO

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AND SIGN UP ON OUR HOMEPAGE!

Ask JOHN NEGUS

John is a gardening legend and here to answer your lovely questions

How to plant a bare-root rose

Q As I was reading through the 9 Nov issue of *Amateur Gardening,* I read Ruth saying you should plant a rose either at or just above soil level.

We have just come back from a rose planting and pruning day with Peter Beales Roses where we were told to plant with the union (the place where the stems meet the rootstock) one-two inches below the soil level - this anchors the plant firmly and prevents windrock.

I have cross-checked with my RHS Encyclopedia of Gardening and the advice is the same there. For extra measure I also checked the David Austin website: again the same advice is given - complete with a video clip to show how it is done.

What is the best way to plant them?
Carol Anelay (via email)

Rose planting instructions change through the years, for a reason

A This caused quite a debate among the *AG* staff.

Ruth explained that when she was learning the horticultural ropes, many years ago, she was taught that when planting roses either in the soil or in a container, the graft union should be at or just above soil level to reduce the risk of rotting at the critical join.

John Negus added: In my experience, though some rose growers might disagree, it's best to plant a bare-rooted rose at soil level. Why? Because deeper planting may cause shoots to die.

Initially, when your bushes arrive, use sharp secateurs to shorten extra long fleshy roots, leaving thinner, fibrous ones to absorb nutrients. Additionally, prune all shoots to one third of their length, cutting to outward-facing buds.

If roots are dry, soak them in water for a day. Then, choosing a mild spell to plant when the soil is crumbly, dig a generous hole and sit your bush in position with its roots spread out.

A word of warning: if you are planting where you have removed roses older than 10 years, sprinkle roots with mycorrhizal fungi (Rootgrow) to increase vigour and reduce risk of replant disease.

How to keep your chillies chilly!

Q We successfully grew lots of chilli plants last year and had lots of leftover chillies. Do you have any storage tips please for this year's harvest?
Lucas Marshall (via email)

A Well done on your chilli successes, it's always satisfying when something goes well.

If you don't fancy sewing harvested fruits together and stringing them up to dry, I would recommend freezing them.

There are two ways of doing this. The first is to wash and thoroughly dry the chillies and bag them up in a medium or large plastic bag or two.

It's best to use larger bags as it's easier to loosen the chillies to take out as you want and they are less likely to freeze together - this is also why you should make sure all surface moisture has dried before freezing.

Another option is to chop them up, removing the hot membrane and seeds if you wish to lower their heat. Place them in ice cube trays and top them up with water before freezing.

This way, you can remove them a cube at a time and drop them into whatever dish you are cooking.

Above: **Freezing is an easy way of storing chillies**

Quick questions & answers

Hibiscus aren't too tricky to grow

How to care for a hibiscus

Q I have been given a hibiscus and am wondering about the best way to feed and generally care for it.
Rachel Parker, Plymouth

A Whether it's the frost-tender indoor species, *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*, or a variety of the hardy *H. syriacus* you have, water freely from spring to summer and liquid-feed fortnightly with a high-potash tomato fertiliser when growth is vigorous.

If it's a hardy kind, ease up on watering and feeding from autumn to spring.

If it's the tropical *H. rosa-sinensis*, place it in a warm place for winter where the temperature doesn't drop below 13C (55F).

Growing is in the pipeline

Q What is the best way to grow *Aristolochia littoralis* (also known as Aristolochia elegans and Dutchman's Pipe)
Mark Rothman (via email)

A Commonly called calico flower, this is a native of Brazil which needs to be grown in a greenhouse or conservatory in which the temperature does not drop below 7C (45F).

Yielding glorious speckled white and purple-brown flared trumpet flowers amid bluish-green heart-shaped leaves, it commands attention.

Help it to flourish by liquid-feeding with a high-potash tomato fertiliser from spring to late summer.

Right: Calico flowers need warmth to grow well

Ask JOHN NEGUS

John is a gardening legend and here to answer your lovely questions

How can I keep 'Susan' looking happy?

Magnolia 'Susan' suits many types of garden and likes a sheltered spot

Q My potted *Magnolia* 'Susan' isn't looking happy. It's planted in a big pot in a sunny position. She has quite a lot of leaves but nearly all the leaves are edged dark brown. What should I do?
Peter Elford (via email)

A Bad luck! I suspect that your *Magnolia* 'Susan' is suffering from potassium deficiency, the symptoms of which include leaf browning.

I urge you, therefore, to correct the imbalance by repotting your plant in a quality peat-free potting compost, such as Miracle-Gro Rose, Tree and Shrub, as soon as possible.

Then feed it with sulphate of potash, monthly, from April until October. Repeat annually.

There is no need to cut back your magnolia. Indeed, when I viewed the image you sent us it appeared to be nicely shaped with well-spaced branches, so no pruning is necessary.

Magnolia are best grown in free-draining soil with a neutral to acidic pH - or in a mix of multipurpose and ericaceous compost.

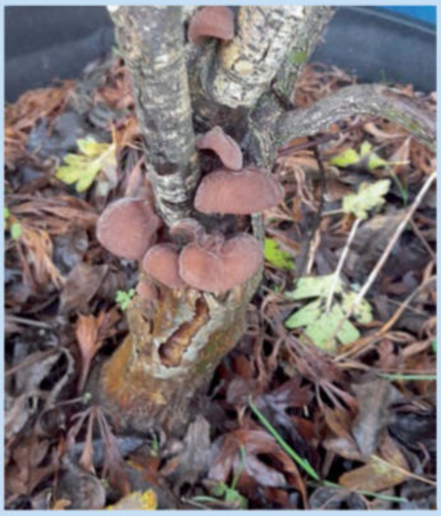
They do best in full sun or partial shade, sheltered from strong winds as late frosts can damage their flowers.

Magnolia 'Susan' can grow up to 4m (12ft) tall, but it can take up to 20 years for them to reach this height.

They are best propagated via cuttings and suit many types of garden, from informal cottage settings to city courtyard plots.

Will my acer survive a fungal attack?

Q Although my acer was healthy during the year, I have noticed that there is a fungus growing around the trunk. Could you please tell me what it is and if it will harm the tree.
Sue Malins, Alcester



Above: *Trichaptum abietinum* is a sign your tree is dying

A Bad luck! Your tree has been attacked by the purple pore bracket fungus (*Trichaptum abietinum*). Not common and always intriguing, its violet-purple spore-bearing pores command a double take.

Sadly, once its distinctively coloured fruiting bodies appear, it's the death knell for your tree. Indeed, it's only a matter of time before its mycelium – minute thread-like roots by which it spreads – infiltrates the whole tree, which then dies.

If the tree, which is liable to fall in high winds, is close to the house or by a path and could endanger structural features or passers-by, I urge you to remove it, roots and all, as soon as possible.

It is a shame, but this needs to happen.

Quick questions & answers

Aerating the soil improves drainage and airflow

How can I help our lawn?

Q Our lawn is looking sad, with moss and worm casts. What can we do?
Sean and Gill Higgins (via email)

A I am sorry that your lawn is less than healthy. I am wondering if the soil is heavy and waterlogged and turf is suffering from poor aeration, or whether it is struggling because of a pest or disease.

For the moment, on a dry day when there hasn't been rain for a few days, aerate it with a garden fork or proprietary aerator and work grit or sharp sand into the holes.

In spring, feed with a suitable lawn fertiliser and hopefully it will recover. Do know though that worm casts are a sign of heathy soil life down below.

Getting cuttings through winter

Q I have rooted some pelargonium cuttings but am worried about getting them through winter. What do you advise?
Pete Hodgson (via email)

A I am delighted that you have rooted several tender geranium (pelargonium) cuttings. Now that they are growing strongly it's important to keep them going.

The best way is to consign them to a heated, frost-free greenhouse or warm, sunny windowsill indoors.

They will grow slowly and enjoy the sunlight. Water carefully, keeping potting compost damp but not soggy.

If they become leggy, cut them back by half their height.

Left: Keep pelargonium cuttings somewhere light and warm

Nerines grow well in pots and provide delightful autumn colour

Can I make my nerines more reliable?

Q I love growing nerines in pots for their autumn show of pink and white blooms. However, they don't always do as well as I expect - what can I do?
Helen Aitchison (via email)

A I am delighted that you enjoy growing nerines – presumably *N. bowdenii* varieties rather than *N. flexuosa*, which needs warmer conditions.

Ideally, cover bulbs with a dry 10cm (4in) mulch of well-rotted garden compost or composted manure after flowering to protect bulbs from hard frost and icy winds. Remove it in spring when new shoots appear.

The spring, when the soil warms up, is also the best time to feed plants with a balanced fertiliser, such as Vitax Q4 or fish, blood and bone meal.

Every few years it is also worth topdressing your pots by removing the top 7cm (3in) of compost and replacing it with fresh, to make sure the plants get enough nutrients to perform well.

Alternatively, in spring you can lift the bulbs from the pots refresh with completely new compost.

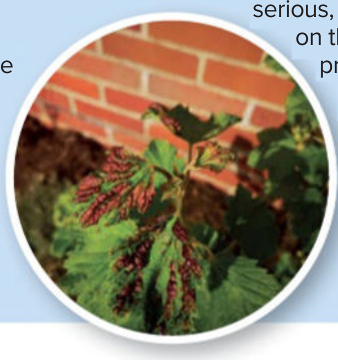
If you wish to propagate your charges, lift, split clumps and replant bulbs when blooms fade.

Remember, nerines dislike being crowded, so stop neighbouring plants from encroaching upon them.

What is causing leaves to blister?

Q Last summer, the leaves on our grape vine and some of our currant bushes became blistered. What caused it and how can I prevent it? It didn't seem to affect their fruit production.
Bob Turner, Lewisham

A If your grapes have succumbed to the same pest which has affected the red and black currants, which have caused leaves to 'bubble', then the problem is leaf blister aphid.



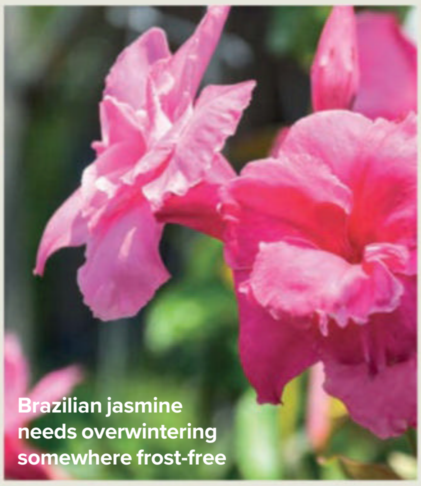
Thankfully, an attack is not life threatening and infested plants usually remain relatively healthy and crop well.

As we are rightly discouraged from using chemicals, I urge you to cut off blistered leaves and bin or burn them. Do not add them to the compost heap where aphid eggs are liable to hatch and spread the problem.

Alternatively, if infestations aren't too serious, you could leave the leaves on the plants and let aphid predators such as blue tits and the young of lacewings, hoverflies and ladybirds, devour them.

Left: Blister aphids are a nuisance but don't affect fruiting

Quick questions & answers


Brazilian jasmine needs overwintering somewhere frost-free

Can you name this climber?

Q Please could you identify this climbing plant with a small pink flower. It was given to me as a present in a pot but did not have a label. Should I prune it prior to winter?
Terry Hoye

A The 'present' is a Brazilian jasmine, also call *Mandevilla* x *amabilis* 'Alice du Pont'. A robust tropical climber, it needs a minimum temperature of 14C/57F, so must be overwintered in a heated greenhouse or in a warm, sunny spot indoors.

The only pruning it needs is the removal of dead and dying shoots, shortening them to healthy tissue. Ideally train it over an obelisk which it should cover with a wealth of fetching pink blooms next summer.

Worried about our sumac

Q Our rhus isn't looking happy, and some of its bark is peeling, even though it has a few shoots coming from its base. How can we save it?
Marie-Anne Tebbit (via email)

A Bad luck! I fear that your *Rhus typhina* or sumac has reached the end of its life. It is not a long-lived shrub and is liable to succumb to such diseases as honey fungus (armillaria) and root death (phytophthora).

The fact that bark is peeling also indicates that your tree is dying, so it is best to get rid of it.

If you wish to grow another rhus, I would advise planting it in a new spot or growing it in a container, as their shoots can become problematic.

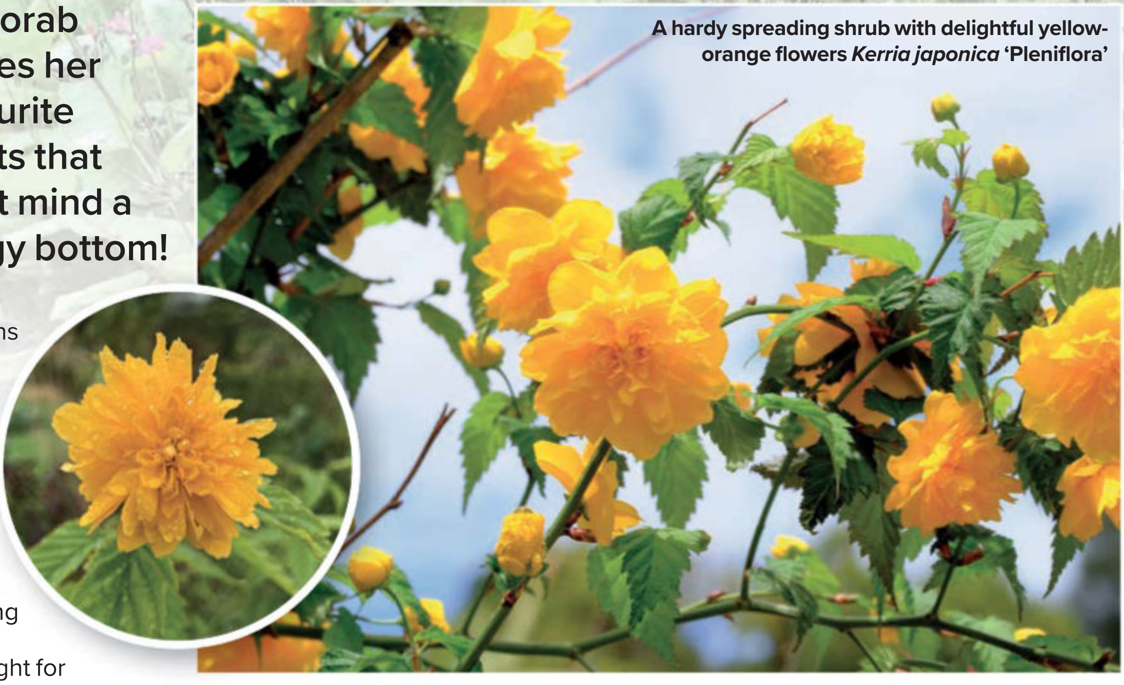
Left: Rhus are attractive but short-lived

The seven best bloomers for damp areas

Liz Zorab shares her favourite plants that don't mind a soggy bottom!

Many gardens have at least one spot that remains damp for much of the year and it can be hard to know what to plant to provide a splash of colour. As the climate becomes more challenging for gardeners, choosing plants that are naturally right for our particular microclimate makes increasing sense, and will be more cost effective and less work in the longer term.

This selection of plants provides interest at differing times of the year, with exciting flowers, colourful foliage or interesting shapes and forms. I continue to grow most of these in my own garden because I know that they perform well.



A hardy spreading shrub with delightful yellow-orange flowers *Kerria japonica* 'Pleniflora'

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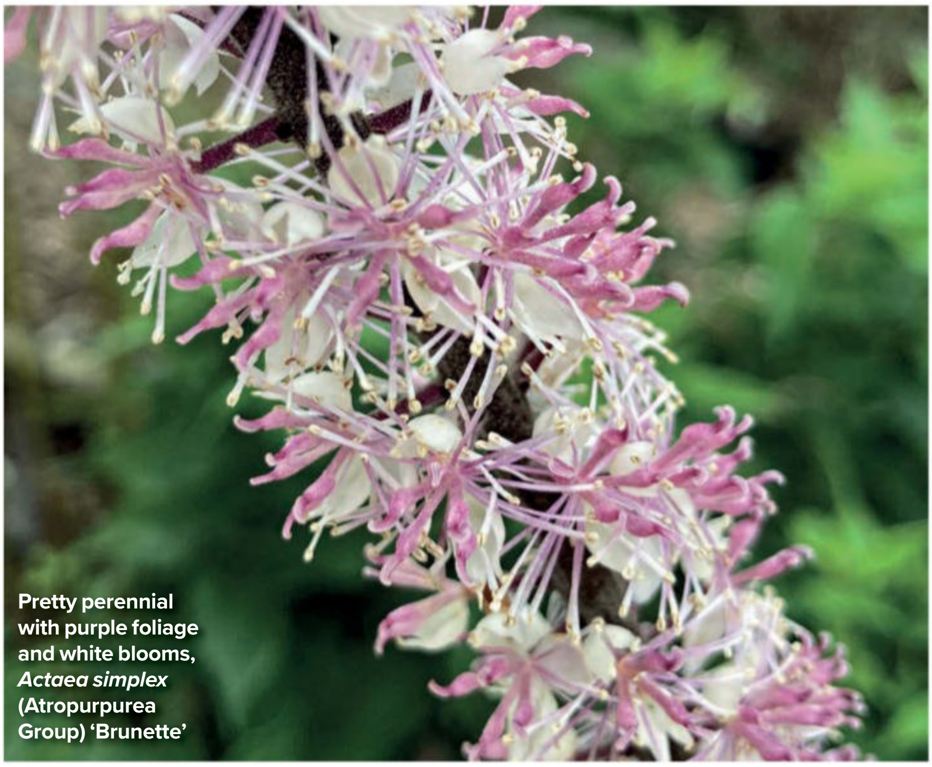


Pretty perennial with purple foliage and white blooms, *Actaea simplex* (Atropurpurea Group) 'Brunette'

All images unless otherwise credited: Liz Zorab

Kerria japonica 'Pleniflora'

The first time I saw kerria flowers, I thought that they looked like scruffy pom poms floating in the air. This spreading shrub has wiry stems upon which the yellow-orange flowers appear in spring. Height and spread 2.5x2m (8.2x6.50ft).

The stems retain their green colour throughout the year and in milder areas, leaves may remain on the plant year-round. It is unfussy about its situation, thrives in full sun and partial shade and requires moist but well-draining soil. It is hardy throughout the UK, even in severe winters.

Bold and beautiful blooms of *Lobelia cardinalis*

© Shutterstock

Lobelia cardinalis

The rich scarlet red flowers make a bright and bold statement as they rise above the foliage. This perennial lobelia produces flowers from late summer and through autumn. Height and spread 90x50cm (3x1.5ft).

It prefers poorly drained, moisture-retentive soil in full sun or partial shade in all but north-facing situations. It's hardy in the milder areas of the UK and in colder areas, you could grow it in pots and move to a frost-free place during autumn.

Filipendula ulmaria

Meadowsweet grows into a dense clump of foliage. From June to September irregular clusters of highly fragrant, cream flowers appear. Height and spread 100cm (3.5ft).

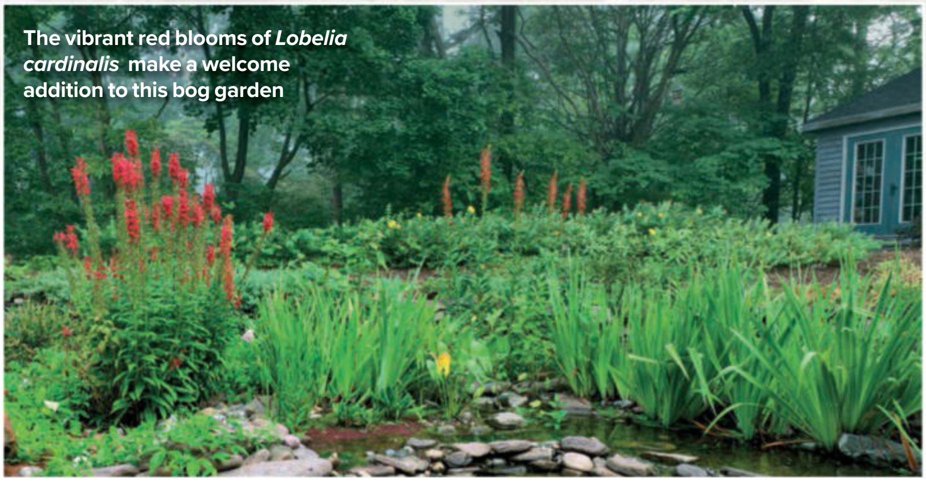
It will fail to thrive on chalky or sandy soil, preferring moist, but well-drained or poorly drained soil. Grow in full sun or partial shade.

Actaea simplex (Atropurpurea Group) 'Brunette'

Also known as cimicifuga, this hardy herbaceous perennial provides interest with dark purple foliage from spring to autumn. It prefers damp and even poorly drained soil.

Grow in any aspect, except south-facing, as it prefers partial shade and a bit of shelter because of its height. Height 1-1.5m (3.2-5ft) and spread up to 1m (3.2ft).

In autumn, purple buds open to white flowers with a hint of pink, which are held above the foliage. Do be aware the plant is harmful if eaten and the berries are poisonous.



The vibrant red blooms of *Lobelia cardinalis* make a welcome addition to this bog garden

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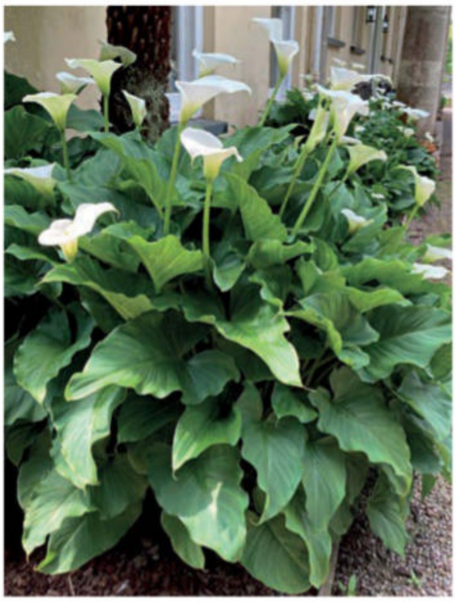
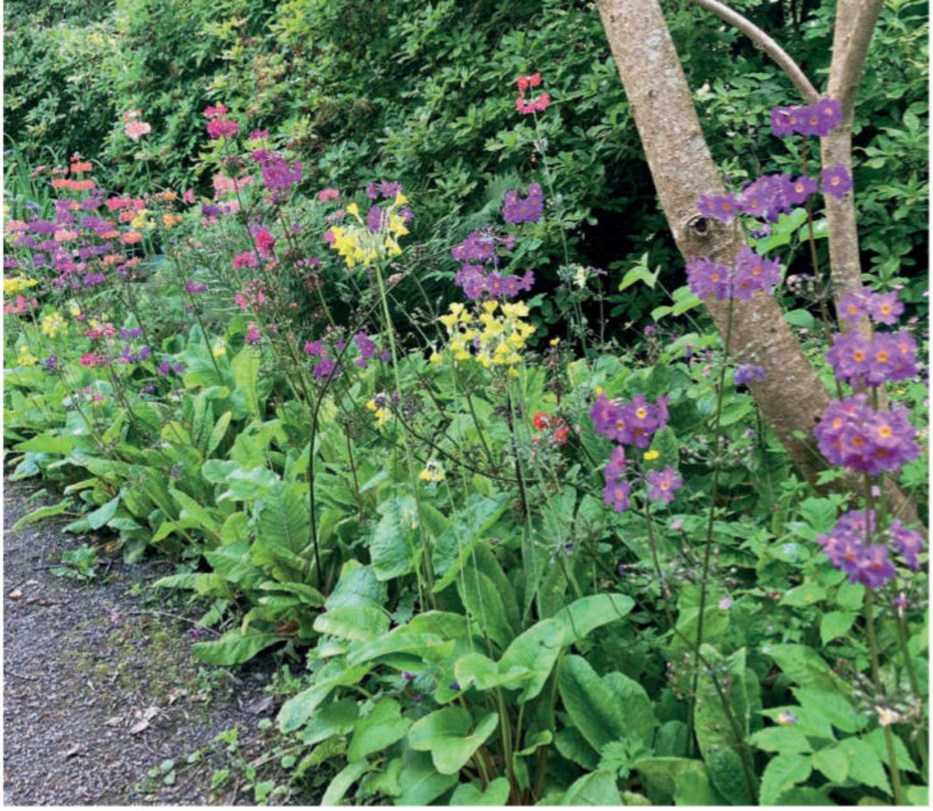
Creamy clusters of *Filipendula ulmaria* (meadowsweet)



ABOVE: Luscious leaves and lilies of *Zantedeschia aethiopica* (see overleaf)

Colourful and cheery blooms of *Primula* Candelabra hybrids



It is native to the UK and Ireland and fully hardy. The buds, flowers and seeds are edible and taste of a combination of hay, almond and vanilla.

Physocarpus opulifolius 'Diabolo'

This is a relatively unfussy plant that prefers an acidic, humus-rich soil that is fairly fertile. This deciduous shrub is very hardy, with red to purple leaves that produce clusters of small pink buds that open to creamy-white flowers in summer. Height and spread 1.5-2.5m (5-8.2ft).

Once established, it has a suckering habit, so if space is limited, try growing in a large container.

Zantedeschia aethiopica

Depending on your growing conditions, this arum lily is an herbaceous perennial or semi-evergreen. It has long, dark green, glossy leaves and during summer and autumn produces yellow flowers that are wrapped by a white spathe.

Height and spread to 100x50cm(3.2-1.6ft), it prefers damp soil, but does need some drainage and would fail to thrive in soil that is waterlogged in winter.

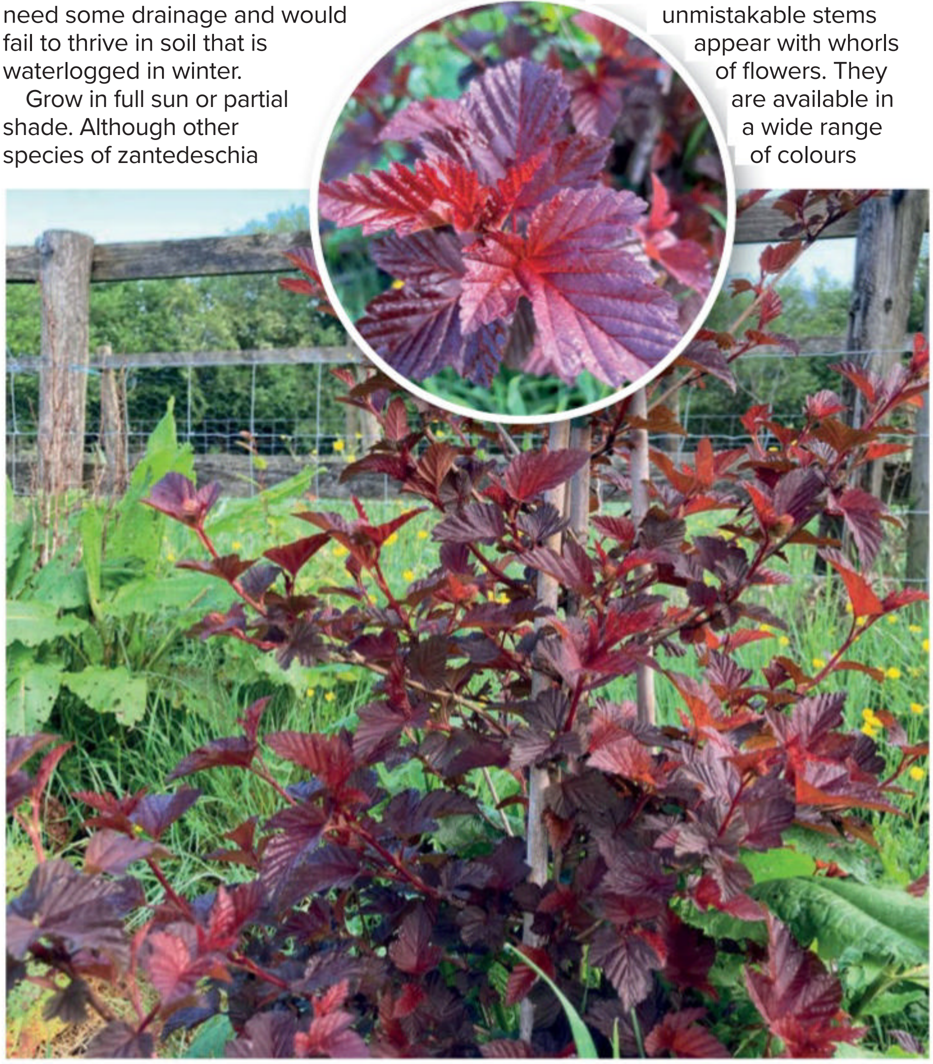
Grow in full sun or partial shade. Although other species of zantedeschia are available, *Zantedeschia aethiopica* is the only one hardy that is widely available.

Primula Candelabra hybrids

From late April until July the unmistakable stems appear with whorls of flowers. They are available in a wide range of colours including, white, pink, red, orange, yellow and purple and their leaves grow from a basal rosette.

These primulas prefer neutral or acid clay or loamy soil, in full sun or partial shade, and are fully hardy throughout the UK and Ireland. They are ideal for cheering up an awkward, poorly drained spot in the garden.

Flowering height ranges from 30-100cm (1-3.2ft).



ABOVE: Unfussy shrub with colourful leaves and flowers *Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Diabolo'

Add an edible

Hablitzia tamnoides

This climbing spinach, also known as Caucasian spinach, reaches 3m (10ft) in height.

It provides a useful harvest of young shoots from March and leaves from April and through the hungry gap. This is a hardy, long-lived perennial that thrives in partial shade and will need some support for climbing.

It may take three years to establish, but it can then live for 20 years or more. The young shoots and baby leaves can be added to salads and the more mature leaves used in the same way as standard spinach.

PLANT WATCH

With **Michael Perry**

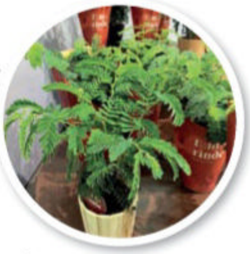
Your plant recommendations from expert plantsman, Michael.

A spineless cactus you can literally hug as 'The Cuddly Cactus' name indicates

The hottest houseplants

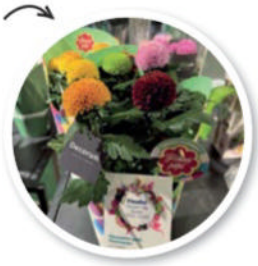
Get ahead of the fashion pack with these eye-catching beauties

Ready for something new in 2025? Here's the hottest selection of new houseplants that have been wowing the crowds across the trade shows of Europe. There's a plant for every room and situation, and these specimens represent a much more exciting proposition than growing a peace lily yet again!



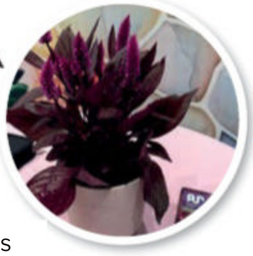
Tamarind

A super innovation from those clever guys in The Netherlands. Tamarind is a spice you've probably heard of, but I bet you didn't know what the plant looked like. I certainly didn't. And I am always a sucker for anything that has pinnate leaves, acacia-style. A welcome addition to any interior.



Flowerpops Pot Chrysanthemum

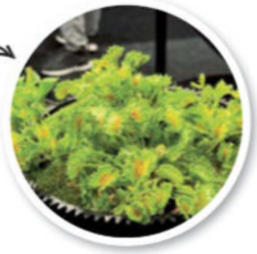
Who said chrysanthemums can't be cool? Certainly not me! I am feeling super excited about this new pot chrysanth by Lionplant, which look like multi-coloured disco balls. It looks like the ideal gift for any age, and will last so much longer than a bunch of boring blooms!



Celosia argentea Mystic Shades ('Zancesha')

Always a lot happening in the celosia world, but this time the focus is on its value as a houseplant.

Mystic Shades has the most gorgeous beetroot-red leaves, with rather racy purple plumes held aloft. An easy-going houseplant for a windowsill, which might last longer than you think. You can also move it outdoors onto the patio in the summer too, once it has been hardened off.



Dionaea muscipula 'Zipp'

Ooh, whatever next, a toothless venus fly trap! Corn.Bak B.V. in The Netherlands has just released this curious little wannabe carnivore. Caused by a mutation within the plant, each trap has a wavy edge, rather than the usual jaws. You can't expect it to chew on insects, but when it looks that cool I really don't mind.

The Cuddly Cactus

Safety is always a consideration when it comes to growing cactus in the home, especially if you have pets or children.

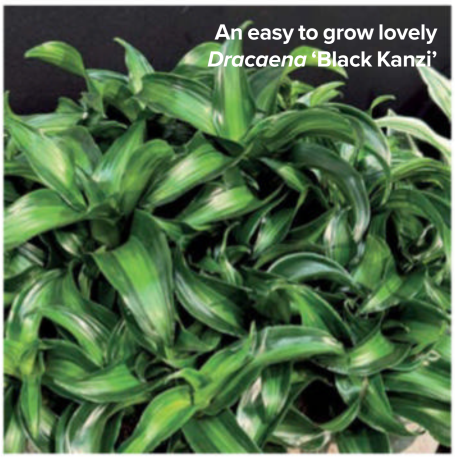
So let's solve that problem in an instant with this 'cuddly cactus', which has no protruding spines. You can literally hug it, and it's a tough, durable plant for a well-lit room.

Dracaena 'Black Kanzi'

From the guys at the Dragontree nursery in The Netherlands, this newish selection forms a lovely rosette of glossy green and gold leaves. Such a carefree plant, it could probably even live in student halls.

It looks great on its own, or as an underplanting for a larger plant - what a fabulous idea.

www.mrplantgeek.substack.com



An easy to grow lovely *Dracaena* 'Black Kanzi'

All images © Michael Perry

TOBY'S TALKING SUNLIGHT, SNOWDROPS AND SOWING

There are signs of life now in the garden

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Snowdrops on the move

Toby explains how to bring some green-fingered sunlight into late January

I used to think of January as a month made entirely of depressing Sunday nights, when weekend cheer was replaced by thoughts of cruel toil at the 'coal face', aka primary school.

I've grown up since then and although the first part of the month still casts a 'Sunday before school' shadow, I've learnt to appreciate the small wins that appear as the month breaks into a jog towards February.

For example, this week, we'll bask in eight hours and 53 minutes of daylight, which might be a long way off the 12 to 12-hour parity of the Spring equinox, but it

We now have a whole extra hour of light compared with the Winter equinox a month ago!

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Above: Woodland plants like cyclamen and, inset, anemones and snowdrops, are able to spread with the help of ants

is an increase of a whole hour compared with the gloom of a month ago.

Plants make use of extra sunlight

I always like to see the snowdrops on the move, especially when they appear in unusual places. This is something that galanthus (as the botanists call them) and woodlanders like anemones and cyclamens often do as their kernels are covered in an oil-rich coating that makes them attractive to ants.

The ants, sniffing a free meal, gather up the fallen seeds and feed this coat (known as an 'elastiome') to their larvae, which leave the seeds untouched and buried at just the right depth to sprout.

After three or four years, the seeds have swollen into bulbs big enough to bloom and appear like pearls in unlikely places, from grassy banks to beneath a tree, even in the cracks in paving.

In one of the landscape gardens I look after, snowdrops don't do as well in the borders as they do in the rough and tumble of the garden's boundary hedges. This is in Devon, where hedges are known as 'Devon Banks' as they're planted atop high ridges of waste soil where ants, and therefore snowdrops, thrive in symbiosis. And thrive they do, spreading in sheets inside the garden and along the base and face of the hedge.

Snowdrops on the move

Snowdrops tend to wander in more modestly sized plots as well, setting up camp on the side of the garden that's shadier and cooler and thinning out where the soil is baked in summer. This represents an opportunity because when the bulbs are 'in the green', i.e. just starting to show leaves, they're easy to move to where they can be more readily seen and enjoyed.

Digging up a couple of dozen clumps to relocate back to the borders where the original bulbs were planted has been part of my January routine for years.

The tool for the job is a small border spade that you push in alongside the clumps to lever the bulbs and spaghetti-like roots to the surface without damage. As long as a plug of soil is left around the clumps and they're replanted at the same depth and watered in, they'll happily come into flower without skipping a beat.

It doesn't need saying - but here goes anyway! Moving snowdrops within a garden is fine but never do so from road verges or where they've naturalised. Even though snowdrops are non-native flowers and recent arrivals (most were brought here by soldiers returning from the Crimean war in the 18th century), once established in the wild they are protected by law and are part of the natural capital shared by our country and wildlife. And what a sight they make when they cover the ground in drifts.

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Above: As snowdrops emerge in the green they are easy to move around your garden

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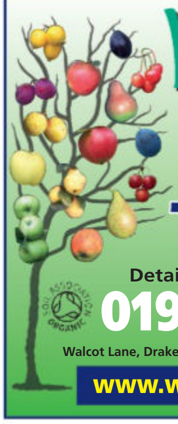

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Toby's happy place in January is in his greenhouse, pottering and planting

Toby is planting broad beans and just a few other varieties right now

Toby's greenhouse preparations

Snowdrops aside, the thing that makes me most happy in January is spending time pottering in the greenhouse. Protected from the cold and rain, it's an all-weather place to garden and steal a march on the growing season.

The list of seeds to sow at this juncture is small and largely consists of sweet peas, broad beans and snapdragons that I forgot to sow in autumn. However, along with mixed salads, onions and parsley, they will prevail provided you keep the greenhouse or windowsill glass crystal clear to maximise the low winter sun.

Fail to do this, and early sowings become leggy as they stretch towards the light, so I spritz the inside with a cleaner and buff the glass with a cloth and use a weather-related trick for the outside and difficult-to-reach roof. Just as a flurry of snow or frost is melting, I brush with a broom over the glass and the ice holding onto the grime, dirt and dust gets dragged away with it.

Above: Toby's trick for cleaning hard-to-reach greenhouse roofs is to let the ice and snow help clear the dirt away

As well as the glass, pots and kit and caboodle under the benches, I give the soil inside the greenhouse a clean. This is important where the soil surface develops a white colour due to a buildup of salts left behind by fertiliser and most often seen where tomatoes are routinely grown.

In concentration, these salts inhibit germination but are easy enough to remove by gently forking over the surface and flooding it with a hose. This dilutes the salts and washes them down through the deeper soil profile. With a mulch of compost tickled onto the top, the beds are primed for sowing/planting in spring.

One final thing to remember, it's not just gardeners that like a place to potter out of the cold. Mice (cute though they are) will also make a bee-line for the shelter of a greenhouse and gobble up any unprotected seeds that you sow.

To keep their nibbling at bay, cover newly sown pots with mesh or a sheet of glass or, even better, place them on shelves suspended from the greenhouse roof that are out of reach to all but the most acrobatic rodents.

Once up and growing, the seedlings are less vulnerable but not completely immune, so keep an eye out should you notice the remains of nibbled leaves near your pots and nose-shaped holes in the compost.

GARDEN MUSINGS

with **Bob Flowerdew**, long-standing AG contributor, broadcaster and all-round expert.

How to grow edimentals

Bob explains how to hedge your bets with a hardy ornamental and edible garden

Bob recommends growing plants like this Japanese quince which are both ornamental and edible

With increasingly difficult weather, there's sense in concentrating more on perennial crops.

Trees and shrubs may suffer, but will often still produce harvests in adverse conditions when annual crops fail. They are also firmly in the ground and growing away when it may be near-impossible due to the wet or cold to sow or plant vegetables.

Mind you, there have to be half-decent conditions to plant trees and shrubs properly, although the window to do so is larger. Pot-grown specimens can be planted almost any day of the year, but only if you're methodical with watering them from then on during dry periods.

However, planting during the next three months is better providing your soil's neither frozen nor waterlogged. Bare-rooted plants are a better choice than those in containers, whose roots tend to go in circles and need teasing out when planting. But either will do fine providing they are well firmed in, and staked if they are a tree. This is not so much to keep it upright but really to stop the top pulling the roots to and fro as it blows in the wind, as this will weaken the central stability. An old check to see if you've planted something firmly enough is to take hold and pull hard; if it comes up easily you've just not firmed down sufficiently, so you'd better do it again, properly, using more force packing the soil back down.

Ornamentals with fruits

Now, not everyone wants a utilitarian vegetable plot next to their house, and many prefer to surround themselves with ornamental plants. These can also be productive as well; indeed it almost seems pointless having a purely pretty plant when another has fruits or leaves you can also eat into the bargain.

Obviously apples, pears, plums, figs, cherries, apricots are worth it, and also red and white currants and blueberries which give brilliant displays (though these may be very short unless plants are netted to protect fruit from birds).

Admittedly blackcurrants, gooseberries, honeyberries, the edible honeysuckle *Lonicera caerulea*, (most other honeysuckle berries are poisonous) and raspberries are less beautiful, but they are tasty and effective as foliage plants. Then there are other options more commonly thought of as ornamental which also provide fruits, for jelly if not dessert. Crab apples, Japanese quince *Chaenomeles japonica*, mahonia and berberis berries all make excellent jellies, as do the stunning yellow flowering *Cornus mas*, and rowan (there's a larger and sweeter berried form called *Sorbus aucuparia* var.*edulis*).

Above: *Xanthoceras sorbifolium* offers stunning blooms and tasty nuts

Nut, hips and berries

There are several attractive elderberry cultivars that give crops, and corkscrew hazels also provide nuts every bit as delicious as cultivated varieties. I'd not recommend walnut and sweet chestnut as these get far too big for most gardens, but the little known and not so large *Xanthoceras sorbifolium* is stunning in flower and has edible foliage and 'nuts'.

Rosa rugosa hips are large, tasty, make excellent syrup, and their blooms are just as beautiful as other roses. Surprisingly many fuchsias are hardy enough to survive in the open garden AND they have edible berries - in fact fuchsia societies often have a jelly competition. Grapevines such as 'Boskoop Glory', 'Siegerrebe' and 'Regent' are delicious and productive. They can be hard work but are worth the effort as they look fantastic when well trained.

You can find out more about Bob via his website **www.bobflowerdew.com** and what's happening in his garden via Twitter (now X) **@FlowerdewBob**

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† Regretfully we are unable to ship live plants to the following postcode areas: HS, IV41-IV56, KW15-KW17, PA34, PA41-48, PA60-PA78, PA80, PH40-PH44, TR21-TR24, ZE1-ZE3.

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